



# Experiencing a CHANGE OF HEART



*You and I can become beneficiaries of a mighty change of heart and a spiritual rebirth, thereby reaping the promised blessings of peace, love, true joy, and a disposition to do good continually.*

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Of the Seventy

Some years ago in Eastern Europe, I listened as a young elder stood before his fellow missionaries in zone conference to share an experience that shaped his life. He and his companion had found and taught a middle-aged man named Ivan (name has been changed) in a distant city. Their investigator came from a difficult background, as was reflected in his well-used clothing, ragged beard, and hesitant demeanor.

Life had been harsh and unkind to him.

Without any prior religious training, Ivan had much to overcome. Practices not in harmony with the restored gospel had to be set aside. New principles needed to be accepted and then incorporated. Ivan wanted to learn, and he prepared himself diligently for his baptism and confirmation. His clothing remained threadbare and his beard ragged, but he had taken the first steps. Shortly after Ivan's baptism, the missionary was transferred. He hoped that he might again cross paths with Ivan.



**A**lma the Younger personally experienced the transformation from being an enemy to God to becoming a new creature, a being who was converted and, therefore, committed to building the kingdom.

Six months later the mission president reassigned the young elder to his former branch. Surprised but eager to return, the elder, with a new companion, came early to sacrament meeting his first Sunday back in the branch. The members were pleased to see the missionary in their midst again. They rushed forward with broad smiles and warm greetings.

The elder recognized nearly everyone in the small congregation. However, he searched in vain among the faces for the man he and his companion had taught and baptized six months earlier. There arose within the elder a sense of disappointment and sadness. Had Ivan returned to his harmful habits? Had he failed to honor his covenant

of baptism? Had he lost the blessings promised by his repentance?

The elder's fears and reflections were interrupted by the approach of an unfamiliar man who was rushing forward to embrace the missionary. The clean-shaven man had a confident smile and an obvious goodness radiating from his countenance. Wearing a white shirt and a carefully knotted tie, he was on his way to prepare the sacrament for the small gathering that Sabbath morning. Only when the man began to speak did the elder recognize him. It was the new Ivan, not the former Ivan they had taught and baptized! The elder saw embodied in his friend the miracle of faith, repentance, and forgiveness; he saw the reality of the Atonement.





**President Brigham Young taught that “a new birth” describes those who are “fully and solely devoted to the Spirit of truth and to God.”**

The missionary told his peers attending the zone conference that Ivan had changed and grown by every measure during the months the elder had been away from the branch. Ivan had embraced the gospel, and it radiated from him. He had experienced a “change of heart” (Alma 5:26) sufficient both to be baptized and to press forward in the continuing process of conversion. He was preparing for the higher priesthood and the ordinances of the temple. Ivan had indeed been “born again” (Alma 7:14).

As the missionary concluded his remarks, he asked himself aloud, “How much of a ‘change of heart’ have *I* experienced in the past six months?” He continued his self-examination, asking aloud, “Have *I* been ‘born again?’” These are two profound questions that each of us should privately pose on a continuing basis.

In the intervening years I have reflected upon the words of the young missionary and the actions of Ivan. I have pondered the role that a “mighty change” (Alma 5:12) in our hearts and being “spiritually . . . born of God” (Alma 5:14) play in the process of embracing the restored gospel. I have concluded that they are clearly an important part of the Lord’s doctrine, not just one-time experiences in mortality. They are ongoing opportunities, intended to deepen the process of conversion and individual personal refinement. They prepare us more fully for eternal life.

### **Challenges of Spiritual Rebirth**

The challenges of being born again and experiencing a mighty change of heart are challenges we all must face. Some in the Christian community believe they can be born again merely by acknowledging Christ as the Savior of the world, independent of any previous or subsequent personal behavior. Some assert that the *simple recognition* of Christ’s role, combined with the *single expression of belief* in Christ, will suffice to bring us ultimately back into the presence of the Father and the Son. As well-intentioned

as this position may be, it is not accurate.

The New Testament provides numerous references to the concept of being born again but, as it is translated, does not always explain exactly *how* it is achieved. For example, the Savior (see John 3:5–7), John the Baptist (see Matthew 3:11), and Paul (see Romans 6:2–6; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 4:29; Ephesians 4:24) proclaim the principle, but they do not clarify its meaning.

By contrast, the Book of Mormon is a wonderful resource to better understand the process of experiencing a mighty change of heart and of being born again. Its prophets provide a fuller doctrinal declaration of the process. Both phrases are explored more fully by Alma the Younger, who posed three questions to members of the Church: “I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14).

We know from the standard works that baptism by immersion allows us to become a member of the Church, but that ordinance alone does *not* constitute the spiritual rebirth that allows us to return to the presence of Heavenly Father. Similarly, as we are confirmed following baptism, we have the *right* to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. However, only when we have truly repented—and thus actually *receive* the Holy Ghost—can we be sanctified and thus be born again spiritually. Hence, Alma’s piercing inquiries are valid for each of us repeatedly throughout life.

President Brigham Young (1801–77) preached of the “new birth” as follows: “There is such a thing as the birth of the Spirit while we live in the flesh.—And when we understand more perfectly our own independent organization, which God has given us, and the spirit world, and the principles and powers that act on this organism, we will learn that a person can be so fully and solely devoted to the Spirit of truth and to God, and be so wrapped up in

that Spirit that it may be called, with propriety, a new birth.”<sup>1</sup>

King Benjamin, in a stirring address to his people, counseled them concerning how they should live gospel principles (see Mosiah 2–4). He then boldly asked if they believed his words. Their poignant response provides a powerful example: “And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

They also said, “We are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in *all* things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:5; emphasis added).

King Benjamin then explained to them what had happened and with what result, providing an excellent definition of being born again:

“Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant.

“And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:6–7).

These followers of King Benjamin clearly had experienced such an exceeding change of heart that they had no more disposition to do evil; further, they were clearly spiritually begotten, or born again.

Remember that being born again does not eliminate our memory of past sins, but it will provide peace of conscience and relieve the pain of transgression (see Mosiah 27:29; Alma 36:19).



**“Members of the Church who have actually been born again,” said Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “have attained their position, not merely by joining the Church, but through faith, righteousness, love, and overcoming the world.”**

### **Blessings of Being Born Again**

Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reminds us that “those members of the Church who have actually been born again are in a blessed and favored state. They have attained their position, not merely by joining the Church, but through faith (1 John 5:1), righteousness (1 John 2:29), love (1 John 4:7), and overcoming the world. (1 John 5:4.)”<sup>2</sup>

Alma the Younger personally experienced the transformation from being an enemy to God to becoming a new creature, a being who was converted and, therefore, committed to building the kingdom:

“For, said he, I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit.

“And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, *all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again*; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters;

“And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 27:24–26; emphasis added).

If *all* people must be born again and have a change of heart, it matters not if we were born into the Church or were converted later as youth or adults. We all must at some point experience that change of heart and that rebirth of the Spirit as we continue in the process of conversion. The process of rebirth and change of heart is intended to be comprehensive, available to *all* nations, and, hence, each individual.

The scriptures offer accounts of people who were born again in a remarkable manner, such as Paul (see Acts 9:1–20) and Alma the Younger (see Mosiah 27:8–37). However, for most people in biblical and Book of Mormon times, as well as today, this change of heart is not a singular event



but rather a private and gradual process.

Elder McConkie, speaking at a Brigham Young University First Stake conference, offered these comforting and encouraging words: “With most people, conversion [spiritual rebirth and accompanying remission of sins] is a process; and it goes step by step, degree by degree, level by level, from a lower state to a higher, from grace to grace, until the time that the individual is wholly turned to the cause of righteousness. Now, this means that an individual overcomes one sin today and another sin tomorrow. He perfects his life in one field now, and in another field later on. And the conversion process goes on until it is completed, until we become, literally, as the Book of Mormon says, saints of God instead of natural men.”<sup>3</sup>

It matters not whether our spiritual rebirth is sudden or, as is more common,

gradual. While the process may be different, the results will be similar. There is no difference in the quality of the conversion. For each individual, experiencing a mighty change of heart is manifested by feelings of joy and love, both of which eliminate the prior pain of disobedience (see Alma 36:20–21). How kind is our Heavenly Father! How encompassing is His Son’s Atonement!

With adherence to these true doctrines, like the missionary in Eastern Europe and his investigator, you and I may become beneficiaries of a mighty change of heart and a spiritual rebirth, thereby reaping the promised blessings of peace, love, true joy, and a disposition to do good continually. ■

#### NOTES

1. *Deseret News*, May 2, 1860, 68.
2. *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (1966), 101; see also Joseph Smith Translation, 1 John 3:9.
3. *Be Ye Converted*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (Feb. 11, 1968), 12.

**W**e become “spiritually begotten” of Christ, King Benjamin taught, when our “hearts are changed through faith on his name.”