

BIBLICAL TRUTH ABOUT MAN, SIN, AND SALVATION

Lesson 22: Regeneration

This is the ninth of seventeen lessons on the biblical doctrine of salvation (soteriology, from Greek *soteria*, salvation). This lesson takes a look at the important topic of regeneration or the new birth. This is God's work in the human heart to bring new spiritual life in salvation. The new birth displays God's transforming power in the application of salvation, turning lost sinners into new creatures in Christ. In new birth the Holy Spirit uses the truth of Scripture to produce new life in the soul; it is a life that is completely supernatural and never ending. Every person who enters the kingdom of God must experience the new birth.

Lesson 22 – Central Truth Q and A

Question: What is regeneration?

Answer: Regeneration is a special work of the Holy Spirit giving life to dead sinners.

Lesson 22 – Memory Verses

John 3:3 *Jesus answered him (Nicodemus), Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

1 Peter 1:3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

1. The Priority of Regeneration

In John 3:1-21 we find one of the Bible's most well-known evangelistic encounters when Jesus revealed to a religious leader named Nicodemus the truth about the new birth or being born again. Nicodemus came at night to talk with Christ privately. He acknowledged that Jesus came from God, but then Jesus turned the conversation and said "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). This reference to God's kingdom was to God's rule over a believer's life and the future kingdom He will establish. To enter that kingdom a person must be born again. Why is there a necessity of being born again? Because the spiritual condition of every sinner is to be dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1, 5). All people are spiritually dead and need to be made spiritually alive, which takes place when they are born again. Nicodemus was regarded as a fine moral person and highly respected religious leader, but he needed a new heart and the life-changing experience of regeneration.

2. The Picture of Regeneration

Nicodemus was puzzled by the concept of new birth and so asked Jesus how a grown man could be born a second time (Jn. 3:4), so Christ told him that He was talking about a spiritual reality. To explain this reality Christ compared God's work of regeneration to the blowing of the wind which can be heard and its effects can be seen without knowing where it came from or where it is going. In a similar way, the Holy Spirit causes new birth in a way that we can't predict or explain. The Spirit's work is

mysterious, powerful, invisible, and beyond the scope of man's control or understanding. The Holy Spirit works in the human heart as He chooses to bring about God's will in salvation.

3. The Power of Regeneration

Regeneration is entirely God's work (Jn. 1:12-13; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3). No one caused their own physical birth and no one is responsible for their own regeneration or spiritual birth. The new birth provides new life for people who are spiritually dead and it involves the creation of new life in the soul. This is an immediate and complete change from a dead state to a new, living state. The new birth brings about an entirely new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). God alone makes sinners alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:4-5) and according to His own will (Jas. 1:17-18). Regeneration is described as a "monergistic" work of God. This term comes from the Greek words *monos* ("one") and *ergos* ("work"), meaning the work of one agent or person who is God. He is the sole agent of regeneration, while man is entirely passive and does not participate at all. Paul describes the state of the lost, natural man: "The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). This is what Paul means when he describes unbelievers as "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). MacArthur and Mayhue comment:

He does not mean that they are motionless or stagnant; he means that they are devoid of the spiritual life that allows them to see the true value of the glory of Christ revealed in the gospel. The essence of spiritual death is spiritual blindness. Man's perception is so disordered by sin that he has no taste for what is objectively delightful (i.e., the gospel of the glory of Christ) but is infatuated with what is objectively repulsive and disgusting (i.e., sin and the glory of self). The unregenerate man pursues what is worthless because he is blind to its detriment, and he refuses what is most precious because he is blind to its value. Thus, when the objective beauty of Christ is held forth in the gospel message, the unregenerate man sees no glory in him, and therefore, left to himself, he will ever and always choose to reject the gospel.¹

Furthermore, the Bible's teaching concerning the natural (lost) man's spiritual inability precludes any concept of synergism (God and man working together) in regeneration:

In his state of spiritual death (Eph. 2:1-3), man is incapable even of understanding the things of the Spirit, let alone of receiving them (1 Cor. 2:14). The sinner's mind is so hostile to God that he is literally unable to submit to God's law (Rom. 8:7), and thus he cannot please God in any sense (Rom. 8:8), including the exercise of faith (Heb. 11:6). Man is blind to the value of God's glory revealed in Christ and is hopelessly enamored with sin, despite its worthlessness. To suggest that a sinner in such a state could, apart from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, summon from within his own deadness the saving faith that God declares to be his sovereign gift (Eph. 2:8) is to wholly underestimate the miserable nature of man's depravity.... Indeed, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). The sight of the kingdom of God can refer to nothing other than the spiritual sight of saving faith (Heb. 11:1, 27; cf. 2 Cor. 4:18), and Jesus says that such a sight is impossible apart from the new birth.²

¹ MacArthur and Mayhue, gen. eds., *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 581-582.

² *Ibid.*, 586.

4. The Proof of Regeneration

The new life imparted to the soul in regeneration does not lie dormant after the moment of conversion, but it produces unmistakable signs of this divine work. These are the proofs of genuine sanctification that always follow regeneration. We list them below in brief summary fashion:

- A. *The regenerate believer makes a practice of righteous living.* “Everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him (God)” (1 Jn. 2:29). To state it negatively, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9). These texts speak of spiritual direction, not perfection.
- B. *The regenerate believer is marked by overcoming the evil influences of this world system.* John writes, “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4). MacArthur and Mayhue comment: “The regenerated believer is not enslaved to do the duty he hates; rather, by virtue of the Spirit’s work, his heart is liberated to love the law he is commanded to follow.”³
- C. *The regenerate believer has a love of God that results in a love of fellow believers and a life of sacrificial service.* John writes, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 Jn. 4:7). Those who are truly born again have a genuine love for the church and they are devoted to meeting the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

5. The Necessity and Urgency of Regeneration

Because every person is spiritually dead and has a sinful nature he needs a new life and new nature. Only God can accomplish this transformation. Christ called this being born again. We must be spiritually regenerated and remade with new hearts that seek, trust, obey, and honor God. Christ concluded his message to Nicodemus by contrasting two different types of people. Some are dead in sins, refusing to believe in Christ, and they suffer God’s condemnation (Jn. 3:18-20, 36). Others experience new birth, believe in Christ, receive His gift of eternal life, and are rescued from sin and judgment (Jn. 3:16).

³ Ibid., 589.