



Doctrine of Salvation

Regeneration¹

Explanation and Scriptural Basis

- **Definition:** *Regeneration is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called “being born again” (see John 3:3–8).*
- **The Necessity of Regeneration²**
 - When we are born, we are born with a sin nature, a condition that Scripture calls spiritual “deadness” (Ephesians 2:1).
 - In this state, we’re not able to anything pleasing to God, nor do we seek God (Romans 3:10-11). Even those we call “seekers” are actually seeking something else – fulfillment, purpose, relief of anxiety – and God uses those questions to bring them to himself, or are asking questions about the God of the Bible because of God’s drawing work (Romans 3:10-11).
 - The natural person is unable to see the Kingdom of God or understand the things of God (John 3:3, 1 Corinthians 2:14).
 - Because of these truths, no one is able to trust in Jesus without the providential initiative of a gracious, saving God.
 - This work was promised in Ezekiel 36:25-27, and illustrated by the vision of the valley of dry bones.
- **Regeneration is Totally a Work of God**
 - In some of the aspects of salvation, we have an active role (like conversion, sanctification, and perseverance). But in the work of regeneration, we have no active role at all. It is instead totally a work of God. See John 1:13.
 - The fact that we don’t have an active role in regeneration is also evident when Scripture refers to it as being “born” or being “born again” (cf. James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:3; John 3:3–8). We did not choose to be born—it is something that happened

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). Much of this lesson outline contains content directly quoted or adapted from chapter 20 of Grudem. Due to copyright and fair use restrictions, this document should not be copied or disseminated.

² Adapted from <https://learn.ligonier.org/guides/regeneration>

to us; similarly, these analogies in Scripture suggest that we are entirely passive in regeneration. See and discuss also Ezek 36:26–27.

- **1 John 5:1** *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.*
- **John 1:12-13** ¹² *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,* ¹³ *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*
- **Titus 3:5** *he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit...*
- **Others:**
 - Philippians 1:29 – Granting of belief by God.
 - 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 – Satan has blinded the minds of unbelievers.
 - John 3:7-8 – Faith is something received, likened to being “born again.”
 - 2 Timothy 2:25 – God is the one that *grants repentance* leading to a knowledge of the truth.
 - 1 Corinthians 1:23-24 – The gospel is effective *to those who are called*.
- Which person of the Trinity is the one who causes regeneration?
 - When Jesus speaks of being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8), he indicates that it is especially God the Holy Spirit who produces regeneration.
 - But other verses also indicate the involvement of God the Father in regeneration. See Eph 2:5; cf. Col 2:13; John 1:17–18; 1 Pet 1:3; Titus 3:5
 - We can conclude that both God the Father and God the Holy Spirit bring about regeneration.
- What is the connection between effective calling (from last week’s lesson) and regeneration?
 - Scripture indicates that regeneration must come **before** we can respond to effective calling with saving faith. (*Note: This statement refers to the logical order; in experience, regeneration, effective calling, and conversion happen all pretty much instantaneously.*)
 - As the gospel comes to us, God speaks through it to summon us to himself (effective calling) and to give us new spiritual life (regeneration) so that we are enabled to respond in faith.

- Effective calling is thus God the Father speaking powerfully to us, and regeneration is God the Father and the Holy Spirit working powerfully in us to make us alive.
- These two things must have happened simultaneously as Peter was preaching the gospel to the household of Cornelius, for while he was still preaching, “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” (Acts 10:44).
- Sometimes the term *irresistible grace* is used in this connection.
 - It refers to the fact that God effectively calls people and also gives them regeneration, and both actions guarantee that we will respond in saving faith.
 - The term *irresistible grace* is subject to misunderstanding, however, since it *seems* to imply that people do not make a voluntary, willing choice in responding to the gospel—a wrong idea, and a wrong understanding of the term *irresistible grace*.
 - The term does preserve something valuable, because it indicates that God’s work reaches into our hearts to bring about a response that is absolutely certain—even though we respond voluntarily.
- **The Exact Nature of the New Birth (Regeneration) is Mysterious to Us**
 - Exactly what happens in regeneration is mysterious to us.
 - We know that somehow we who were spiritually dead (Eph 2:1) have been made alive to God and in a very real sense have been “born again” (John 3:3, 7; Eph 2:5; Col 2:13).
 - **From Ligonier Ministries:** “Fallen in Adam, all people are born dead in sins and trespasses and are incapable of spiritual renewal. Scripture teaches that regeneration (the new birth) is an essential part of the redeeming work of God in Christ. Spiritually dead men and women are utterly dependent on God to sovereignly give them spiritual life. The Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration inasmuch as He convicts people of their sinful condition, of the wrath to come, and of their need for Christ. In the new birth, the Spirit implants in the souls of God’s people new wills, affections, and desires.”³
 - But we don’t understand how this happens or exactly what God does to us to give us this new spiritual life.

³ <https://learn.ligonier.org/guides/regeneration>

- Jesus says, “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).
- Scripture views regeneration as something that affects us as whole persons.
- Of course, our “spirits are alive” to God after regeneration (Rom 8:10), but that is simply because as *whole persons* we are affected by regeneration.
- It is not just that our spirits were dead before—we were dead to God in trespasses and sins (see Eph 2:1). And it is incorrect to say that all that happens in regeneration is that our spirits are made alive (as some would teach), for *every part of us* is affected by regeneration: “If anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creation*; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).
- Because regeneration is a work of God within us in which he gives us new life, it is right to conclude that it is an ***instantaneous event***.
 - It happens only once. At one moment we are spiritually dead, and then at the next moment we have new spiritual life from God.
 - Nevertheless, we do not always know exactly when this instantaneous change occurs.
 - Especially for children growing up in a Christian home, or for people who attend an evangelical church or Bible study over a period of time and grow gradually in their understanding of the gospel, there may not be a dramatic crisis with a radical change in behavior from “hardened sinner” to “holy saint,” but there will be an instantaneous change nonetheless, when God through the Holy Spirit, in an unseen, invisible way, awakens spiritual life within.
 - The change will *become evident* over time in patterns of behavior and desires that are pleasing to God.
- In other cases (in fact, probably most cases when adults become Christians), regeneration takes place at a clearly recognizable time at which the person realizes that previously he or she was separated from God and spiritually dead, but immediately afterward there was clearly new spiritual life within.
 - The results can usually be seen at once—a heartfelt trusting in Christ for salvation, an assurance of sins forgiven, a desire to read the Bible and pray, etc.

- People may say something like this: “I don’t know exactly what happened, but before that moment I did not trust in Christ for salvation. I was still wondering and questioning in my mind. But after that moment, I realized that I did trust in Christ and he was my Savior. Something happened in my heart.”
- Yet even in these cases, we are still not quite sure exactly what has happened in our hearts. It is just as Jesus said with respect to the wind—we hear its sound and we see the result, but we cannot actually see the wind itself. So it is with the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

- **Regeneration Comes Before Saving Faith**

- Using the verses we’ve already discussed, we have defined regeneration to be the act of God awakening spiritual life within us, bringing us from spiritual *death* to spiritual *life*. On this definition, it is natural to understand that regeneration comes before saving faith.
 - It is in fact this work of God that gives us the spiritual *ability* to respond to God in faith. However, when we say it comes “before” saving faith, it is important to remember that they usually come so close together that it will ordinarily seem to us that they are happening at the same time.
 - As God addresses the effective call of the gospel to us, he regenerates us and we respond in faith and repentance to this call. So *from our perspective*, it is hard to tell any difference in time, especially because regeneration is a spiritual work that we cannot perceive with our eyes or even understand with our minds.
- Yet there are several passages that tell us that this secret, hidden work of God in our spirit does in fact come before we respond to God in saving faith (though often it may be only seconds before we respond).
 - When talking about regeneration with Nicodemus, Jesus said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, *he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5).
 - We enter the kingdom of God when we become Christians at conversion (a lesson to come).
 - But Jesus says that we have to be born “of the Spirit” before we can do that.
 - Our inability to come to Christ on our own, without an initial work of God within us, is also emphasized when Jesus says, “No

one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” (John 6:65).

- This inward act of regeneration is described beautifully when Luke says of Lydia, “*The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul*” (Acts 16:14).
 - First the Lord opened her heart, then she was able to give heed to Paul’s preaching and to respond in faith.
 - By contrast, Paul tells us, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14; see also Rom 3:11).
 - The solution to this spiritual deadness and inability to respond only comes when God gives us new life within. See Eph 2:4–5 and Col 2:13.
 - The explanation of the gospel message in Scripture does not take the form of a command, “Be born again and you will be saved,” but rather, “Believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” This is the consistent pattern in the preaching of the gospel throughout the book of Acts and also in the descriptions of the gospel given in the Epistles. The doctrine of regeneration simply teaches that it is a work of God that enables you first to believe.
- **Genuine Regeneration *Must* Bring Results in Life**
 - We just noted that the ability to respond to God in saving faith is the first result of regeneration. See 1 John 5:1. But there are also other results of regeneration, many of which are specified in John’s first epistle.
 - For example, John says, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he *cannot go on sinning*, because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9).
 - Here John explains that a person who is born again has that spiritual “seed” (that life-generating and growing power) within him and that this keeps the person living a life free of continual sin.
 - This does not mean that the person will have a perfect life, but only that the pattern of life will not be one of continuing indulgence in sin. See also 1 John 2:29.

- A genuine, Christlike *love* will be one specific result in life. See 1 John 4:7.
 - Another effect of the new birth is *overcoming the world*. See 1 John 5:3–4.
 - Finally, John notes that another result of regeneration is *protection from Satan* himself. See 1 John 5:18; 1 John 4:4.
- John emphasizes these as *necessary* results in the lives of those who are born again. If there is genuine regeneration in a person's life, he or she *will* believe that Jesus is the Christ, and *will* refrain from a life pattern of continual sin, and *will* love his or her brother and sister, and *will* overcome the temptations of the world, and *will* be kept safe from ultimate harm by the evil one.
 - These passages show that it is impossible for a person to be regenerated and not be truly converted—again, we'll talk about conversion in another lesson.
 - See also Gal 5:22–23; Matt 7:15–23.

Questions for Personal Application

- Have you been born again? Is there evidence of the new birth in your life? Do you remember a specific time when regeneration occurred in your life? Can you describe how you knew that something had happened?
- If you (or a friend who comes to you) are not sure whether you have been born again, what would Scripture encourage you to do in order to gain greater assurance (or to be truly born again for the first time)?