



Lecture # 32

Bible Doctrine I- TH-110

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Course Information

I. Course Description

A study of the persons of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit and their unified teaching of the doctrines of the Bible.

Survey of the Doctrines of the Bible

VII-Doctrine of Salvation

Regeneration

What does it mean to be born again?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

We may define regeneration as follows: Regeneration is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called “**being born again**” (using language from [John 3:3–8](#)).

John 3:3-8 (NASB)

³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

⁸ “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

A. Regeneration Is Totally a Work of God

B. The Exact Nature of Regeneration Is Mysterious to Us

Exactly what happens in regeneration is mysterious to us. We know that somehow we who were spiritually dead ([Ephesians 2:1](#)) have been made alive to God and in a very real sense we have been “born again” ([John 3:3, 7](#); [Ephesians 2:5](#); [Colossians 2:13](#)).

Ephesians 2:1 (NASB)

¹ “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.”



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John 3:3 (NASB)

³“Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John 3:7 (NASB)

⁷“Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

Ephesians 2:5 (NASB)

⁵“Even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).”

Colossians 2:13 (NASB)

¹³“When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”

But we don't understand how this happens or what exactly God does to us to give us this new spiritual life. 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 (**Romans 8:10**), but that is simply because we as whole persons are affected by regeneration.

Romans 8:10 (NASB)

¹⁰“If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.”

It is not just that our spirits were dead before—we were dead to God in trespasses and sins (see **Ephesians 2:1**).

Ephesians 2:1 (NASB)

¹“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.”

And it is not correct to say that the only thing 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 Corinthians 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 of behavior from **“hardened sinner”** to **“holy saint,”** but there will be an instantaneous change nonetheless, when



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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 (and a sense that these are meaningful spiritual activities), a delight in worship, a desire for Christian fellowship, a sincere desire to be obedient to God’s Word in Scripture, and a desire to tell others about Christ.

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 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.

C. In This Sense of “Regeneration,” It Comes Before Saving Faith

Using the verses quoted above, 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 that 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 spirits 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).**



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Now we enter the kingdom of God when we become Christians at conversion. 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 the Father who sent me draws him”** ([John 6:44](#)), and **“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 (literally, the “natural man”) 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 NIV](#)).

He also says of people apart from Christ, **“no one understands, No one seeks for God”** ([Romans 3:11](#)).

The solution to this spiritual deadness and inability to respond only comes when God gives us new life within. **“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”** ([Ephesians 2:4–5](#)).

Paul also says, **“When you were dead in your sins and in the un-circumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ”** ([Colossians 2:13 NIV](#)).

The idea that regeneration comes before saving faith is not always understood by evangelicals today. Sometimes people will even say something like, “If you believe in Christ as your Savior, then (after you believe) you will be born again.” But Scripture itself never says anything like that. This new birth is viewed by Scripture as something that God does within us in order to enable us to believe.

The reason that evangelicals often think that regeneration comes after saving faith is that they see the results (love for God and his Word, and turning from sin) after people come to faith, and they think that regeneration must therefore have come after saving faith.

Yet here we must decide on the basis of what Scripture tells us, because regeneration itself is not something we see or know about directly: **“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](#)).



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Because Christians often tend to focus on the results of regeneration, rather than the hidden spiritual act of God itself, some evangelical statements of faith have contained wording that suggests that regeneration comes after saving faith.

So, for example, the statement of faith of the **Evangelical Free Church of America** (which has been adapted by a number of other evangelical organizations) says, **“We believe that the true Church is composed of all such persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are united together in the body of Christ of which He is the Head.”** (paragraph 8)

Here the word **“regeneration”** apparently means the outward evidence of regeneration that is seen in a changed life, evidence that certainly does come after saving faith. Thus **“being born again”** is thought of not in terms of the initial impartation of new life, but in terms of the total life change that results from that impartation. If the term **“regeneration”** is understood in this way, then it would be true that regeneration comes after saving faith.

Nevertheless, if we are to use language that closely conforms to the actual wording of Scripture, it would be better to restrict the word **“regeneration”** to the instantaneous, initial work of God in which he imparts spiritual life to us. Then we can emphasize that we do not see regeneration itself but only the results of it in our lives, and that faith in Christ for salvation is the first result that we see.

In fact, we can never know that we have been regenerated until we come to faith in Christ, for that is the outward evidence of this hidden, inward work of God. Once we do come to saving faith in Christ, we know that we have been born again.

By way of application, we should realize that 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.

D. Genuine Regeneration Must Bring Results in Life

In an earlier section, we saw a beautiful example of the first result of regeneration in a person’s life, when Paul spoke the gospel message to Lydia and **“the Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul”** ([Acts 16:14](#); cf. [John 6:44](#), [65](#); [1 Peter 1:3](#)).

Acts 16:14 (NASB)

¹⁴ A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.



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John 6:44-45 (NASB)

⁴⁴No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.

1 Peter 1:3 (NASB)

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Similarly, John says, **“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...”** ([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 practices sin, because His [God’s] seed abides [remains] in him; and he cannot [go on sinning] sin, because he [has] is born of God.”** ([1 John 3:9](#)).

1 John 3:9 (NASB)

⁹No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

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 of course 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.

When people are asked to characterize a regenerated person’s life, the adjective that comes to mind **should not be “sinner,”** but rather something like **“obedient to Christ”** or **“obedient to Scripture.”**

We should notice that John says this is true of everyone who is truly born again: **“No one who is born of God will continue to sin.”** Another way of looking at this is to say that **“everyone who does what is right has been born of him”** ([1 John 2:29](#)).

1 John 2:29 (NASB)

²⁹If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.

A genuine, Christ like love will be one specific result in life: **“Everyone who loves is [has] been born of God and knows God”** ([1 John 4:7](#)).

Another effect of the new birth is overcoming the world: **“.....And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever [everyone] born of God has overcome the world”** ([1 John 5:3-4](#)).



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1 John 5:3-4 (NASB)

³ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

⁴ For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

Here John explains that regeneration gives the ability to overcome the pressures and temptations of the world that would otherwise keep us from obeying God's commandments and following his paths. John says that we will overcome these pressures and therefore it will not be "**burdensome**" to obey God's commands but, he implies, it will rather be joyful. He goes on to explain that the process through which we gain victory over the world is continuing in faith: "**This is the victory that has overcome the world, [even] our faith**" ([1 John 5:4](#)).

Finally, John notes that another result of regeneration is protection from Satan himself: "**We know that no one who is born of God [does not continue to sin] sins; but He who was born of God [that is, Jesus] keeps him [safe], and the evil one does not touch [harm] him.**" ([1 John 5:18](#)).

1 John 5:18 (NASB)

¹⁸ We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.

Though there may be attacks from Satan, John reassures his readers that "**because [the one who is in you is] greater than He [the one] who is in the world**" ([1 John 4:4](#)), and this greater power of the Holy Spirit within us keeps us safe from ultimate spiritual harm by the evil one.

1 John 4:4 (NASB)

⁴ You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

We should realize that 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 brother, 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 become truly converted.**

Other results of regeneration are listed by Paul where he speaks of the "**fruit of the Spirit,**" that is, the result in life that is produced by the power of the Holy Spirit working within every believer: "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control**" ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)).



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Galatians 5:22-23 (NASB)

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is 1 love, 2 joy, 3 peace, 4 patience, 5 kindness, 6 goodness, 7 faithfulness, 23 8 gentleness, 9 self-control; against such things there is no law.

If there is true regeneration, then these elements of the fruit of the Spirit will be more and more evident in that person's life.

But by contrast, those who are unbelievers, including those who are pretending to be believers but are not, will clearly lack of these character traits in their lives. Jesus told his disciples:

Matthew 7:15-20 (NASB)

**15 Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?
17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.
18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.
19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
20 So then, you will know them by their fruits.**

Neither Jesus nor Paul nor John point to activity in the church or miracles as evidence of regeneration.

They rather point to character traits in life. In fact, immediately after the verses quoted above Jesus warns that on the day of judgment many will say to him, "**Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?**" But he will declare to them, "**I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers**" ([Matthew 7:22-23](#)).

Matthew 7:22-23 (NASB)

**22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'
23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'**

Prophecy, exorcism, and many miracles and mighty works in Jesus' name (to say nothing of other kinds of intensive church activity in the strength of the flesh over perhaps decades of a person's life) do not provide convincing evidence that a person is truly born again.

Apparently, all these can be produced in the natural man or woman's own strength, or even with the help of the evil one.



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But genuine love for God and his people, heartfelt obedience to his commands, and the Christ like character traits that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit, demonstrated consistently over a period of time in a person's life, simply cannot be produced by Satan or by the natural man or woman working in his or her own strength. **These can only come about by the Spirit of God working within and giving us new life.**