

This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:11-12, NIV)

I have two sons. Like any father, the moment of my sons' birth is imprinted on my heart and mind forever. Think about what happens the moment when a baby is born: When my first son—Andrew, a tiny little bundle of life—appeared he seemed to be half asleep. The midwife, (who obviously knew what she was doing) pulled him out, then smacked him hard, which made him cry. Welcome to the world, my friend! Crying made him take in great gulps of air, which got him going. After she checked to make sure he had all his parts, she gave him back to his mother for some love and some food.

Thank God for the cry. I'll never forget it. The little fellow was alive, and for the last 23 years he has never looked back. Crying, breathing, and feeding are the first signs of life. They are the sure evidence that the baby is alive.

How do you know that you are born again?

How do you know if this regeneration has happened to you? Is it a feeling that you get? How can I know if this has happened to me?

More than any other book in the Bible, 1 John addresses this theme. The apostle John gives us six distinguishing marks of a genuine Christian. They are the vital signs of spiritual life, the evidence that a person has been born again.

Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). When a person has new life in Christ, there will always be evidence. There will be fruit. The living tree has buds and leaves, and the living child breathes and cries and sucks. What does the living Christian do?

Signs of Spiritual Life

Pursuing righteousness

If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. (1 John 2:29)

John wants us to see how you can know who has been born of God, and his point here is very simple—some likeness of a father and mother is seen in the life of a child. Sometimes this is a great blessing; sometimes it causes difficulties and frustrations. But it is always true.

"The apple does not fall far from the tree." The son or daughter bears the image of the father and the mother. So what would it be like to be born of God?

John says, "If you know that God is righteous, it will be immediately obvious to you that those who are born of God will bear this mark. They will bear this mark of doing what is right. Everyone who does what is right has been born of God!"

What does this mean? The Bible says, "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). John, writing to Christians, says, "If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Christians sin and fail in many ways. We always need the cleansing of the blood of Christ.

John is not saying Christians are always right, or that everything we do is right. He is saying that a true Christian hungers and thirsts after righteousness. A person who is born again pursues righteousness. And by the grace of God, we make progress in doing what is right.

Now how do you know what is right? Because many people today have the idea that they know what is right. John says, "If you know that he is righteous..." Righteousness does not begin with a personal system of values. It begins with God. *He* is righteous. If you know that, you will allow him to tell you and show you what is right.

How does that happen? Is it though what you feel God is saying? No! God shows you what is right through his Word. It is through what God has said in his Word that he "teaches rebukes, corrects and trains us in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

If you are born of the God who is righteous, the apple does not fall far from the tree. You will do what is right, and you will learn what is right. How? As you place your life under the authority of God's Word.

That's what we are doing here on Sunday mornings. I hope that's what you are doing during the week. Not just doing what is right based on impulse, but living under the authority of God's Word; learning to do what is right.

John does *not* say, "If you do what is right, you will be born of God." He says, "If you are born of God, you will do what is right." If the life of the God who is righteous is in you, then it will become evident in your pursuing what is right.

Turning from sin

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)

When a person is born again, the evidence of their new life will be seen, not only in the pursuit of righteousness, but also in turning from sin. If sin is your friend, God is your enemy. If God is your friend, sin is your enemy.

James says, “Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4). If sin is your friend, if it’s welcome in your life, if you want to hang onto it, then God is your enemy. When God becomes your friend, sin becomes your enemy.

Bishop Ryle describes the change that regeneration brings in a man’s life. Before the man was converted, there was...

“...no quarrel between him and sin—they were friends. [The man is comfortable with his sin. But, now that he’s converted], he hates sin, flees from it, fights against it, counts it his greatest plague, groans under the burden of its presence, mourns when he falls under its influence and longs to be delivered from it altogether.”¹

The Christian is never wholly free from sin in this life. Indeed, anyone—including any Christian—who says or even thinks he is without sin deceives himself (1 John 1:8).

Notice that John says, “The person born of God will not *continue* to sin. The person born of God cannot *go on* sinning.” Jesus came to destroy the work of Satan (1 John 3:8), so how can you continue in it?

The reason why the Christian will not and cannot continue in sin is because he is born of God and God’s seed remains in him. The new birth makes continuing in sin impossible.

A remarkable illustration of this can be seen in the amazing change that takes place in the birth of a child: When a child is in the womb for months, that life is surrounded by water. The child lives in the water. But as soon as the child’s first breath is taken, the nature of its life is changed. From the moment of birth, the child can no longer live in the water. The child has a new life that has to be lived in the air.

The child can go *in* water, swim *through* water, and even go *under* the water. You can hold your breath and stay under water for 30 seconds, or a minute, or even more. But you cannot continue under the water after you’ve been born.

What once was your life is no longer possible for you. You cannot go back to it. Being born has changed the nature of your life. What used to be natural has now become not just difficult, but impossible. You cannot do it. You cannot live under water.

That’s what it is like when you are born again. You cannot continue in sin. There will be times when you fail, but you cannot live there.

The sinner is comfortable with sin. It doesn’t bother him, but when you are born again, your conscience is activated. You can’t settle with something that you know is wrong in your life. You can’t sleep. You can’t rest. Holding onto a sin, for a Christian, is like holding your breath under water. It takes a great effort, and you can’t do it for long.

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied*, (Moscow: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2000), 98

In the new birth God becomes your friend, and sin becomes your enemy. You can't live with sin like you did when sin was your friend. You turn from it. And when you fall into it you turn from it again.

Repentance is a life-long process. We learned before that it is turning from as much as you know of your sin to give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of God. That is a lifetime pursuit, and it begins with the new birth.

If you want to be more holy than you are, if you hate your sins and want to be free from them, thank God for that. It is a sure sign that God's life is in you.

Loving God and other people

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

Regeneration makes a lasting difference in a person's life. It is not a private, emotional experience that tickles your feelings and then vanishes. The new birth so changes you that it brings you into the life of love that God calls you to pursue.

Jesus described that life like this: "To love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31). Love is the sign, the sure evidence that you have been born of God. "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."

Have you ever wished that you could love more deeply? Have you ever longed for an enlarged capacity in your soul for patience and kindness? How is that going to happen?

John says, "Love comes from God" (v7). That's where it comes from. That's where you receive love, and where you gain the capacity to give love. If you read on, John fills out the meaning:

Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (John 4:8-10)

Here is love: God is love, and love comes from God. The Father sent his Son into the world for you. The Son of God gave his life as an atoning sacrifice for your sins. If you are born of God—who is love—you will grow in love for God and for other people.

After Birth There is a Whole World of Growth

The signs of life grow and develop over time

Regeneration is a completed work. It is like being born. Either it has happened completely or it has not happened at all! But the life that comes in the new birth grows. The signs of life may be quite faint at first, but by God's grace they gain strength and grow.

Our son Andrew is 23 years old now. His breathing and his feeding have developed over the years. 23 years ago he was taking short little puffs of breath. Now he takes in huge gulps of air on the track when he is running. Then he was satisfied with a few ounces of milk. Now, he will polish off a steak—and then he wants more!

As you grow in the Christian life, the signs of life will increase. They will deepen and strengthen. Your love for Christ will deepen. Your victory over sin will increase. You will make progress in pursuing righteousness. Living things grow. So will you when God gives you spiritual life.

Sometimes the signs of life can be very fragile. My sister-in-law, Kathy, gave birth to a premature baby. When little Megan was born, she was on a ventilator for over a month. She had open heart surgery when she was just a month old.

Her breathing was shallow; the life within her was very faint. Her father and mother watched over her and prayed for her in intensive care week-by-week. But now, by the grace of God, she breathes well.

It's not just at the beginning of the Christian life that this happens. If you or someone you know is in an accident, they are placed in intensive care, and their vital signs grow faint. You can come to a place in the middle of your Christian life when it seems the signs of life are very faint. You are laid low.

I want to give you this promise: God sustains his children. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

The good shepherd never abandons his sheep. He never loses his sheep. He died to save them, and he lives to keep them—"I give them eternal life and they shall never perish."

The signs of life are gifts not demands

When you see this, you will have wonderful joy. Imagine what it would be like if these signs of life were God's demands. Suppose God said, "I will give you new life, but you have to earn it. Here's how: You have to do what is right, you have to stop sinning, and you have to love God and love other people."

If that was the message, what would your life be like on Monday? The Christian life would be one massive effort. The whole thing would be riddled with anxiety. If the Christian life were a demand, the whole thing would be impossible. It cannot be done.

In his excellent book *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Augustine tells about how he had lived an immoral life, driven by his own passions. Soon he found that his sins had power over him. And when he wanted to change, he found that he could not.

He looked at the life God was calling him to lead, and he knew it was beyond him. So he came to God with this now famous prayer: "Command what You will. But give what you command."²

Do you see what he is saying? When he looked at the life God was calling him to live, he saw that he could not do it. "Give me this life that you are calling me to live!" That's what God does in regeneration. He gives what he commands.

The signs of spiritual life are gifts of God that become yours in regeneration. God gives you a hunger and thirst for righteousness. When he makes you his friend, he makes sin your enemy. He gives you a new love for Christ and for other people. These are the signs of spiritual life. They are the wonderful gifts of God in regeneration.

Christian believer, pursue righteousness and love!

You are going to come to a situation this week that is costly. You are going to know clearly what is wrong and what is right:

You know that God is righteous. You have been born of him, so do what is right, whatever the cost, whatever the pressure. Do it by the power of God's Spirit who lives in you.

God is your friend. That means sin is your enemy. Give it no place in your life. Flee it. Resist it. Refuse it. Give it no quarter.

Love comes from God, so love one another. Love the brothers and sisters with whom you disagree. Love those who try your patience. God has loved us, so we must love one another. If you have this life in you, grow in what he has planted in you.

Maybe you are saying, "This feels impossible to me. What you are describing seems like something that is beyond me." The only way for you to live as a Christian is for God to give you this life.

You're not going to get there by an effort at self-improvement. But if you were born of God, if the life of God came into you, you would be in an entirely different position.

² *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, <http://www.amazon.com/Confessions-St-Augustine-English-Version/dp/0800787625/>, Book X, Chapter 29, (Ada: Revell, 2008)

Listen to these words of Jesus: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me... streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38).

That is a promise and an invitation that is for you. He says, “Come to me! Believe in me!” And when you do, the life that is in him will flow within you. He will give you something you do not have right now—streams of living water will flow within you.

He laid down that life on the cross. He took it up in his resurrection, and he is able to give new life to you. If you find yourself saying, “That’s what I need. I need to find life that I do not have;” I invite you to come to God and tell him your need now:

I need you to give me a new heart.
I need you to place your Holy Spirit in me.
I need you to regenerate me with new life, love, and power.
I need you to save me.

Put your trust in the one who said, “Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within him.”

© Colin S. Smith

Permissions: You have permission and are encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format you choose, as long as you do not alter or change the wording in any way and do not charge a fee (beyond the cost of reproducing these materials). For posting on the web, a link to this document on our website (www.UnlockingtheBible.org) is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Unlocking the Bible, 1-866-865-6253.

Please include this statement on every copy distributed:

By Colin S. Smith. © Colin S. Smith. Website: www.unlockingthebible.org