

Watch Your *Doctrine*

Session 4: Regenerated by the Spirit with Pastor Colin Smith

In our last session “Ruined by Sin”, we looked at the effects of sin on every part of our lives. Sin has darkened our minds, distorted our affections, and disabled our wills.

Today, we are looking at how God reverses the effects of sin in our lives. God intervenes to open our blind eyes so that we grasp and believe the truth. He changes our hard hearts so that we love Him freely and He redirects our stubborn wills so that we serve Him gladly. God does this by His Holy Spirit, and the Spirit’s great work of intervention is called regeneration.

Regeneration is a wonderful work of God and I think you will be encouraged as you see that God has regenerated you. And by the power of His Spirit He is able to regenerate others, including some of the people you are seeking to lead. Let’s begin with three questions:

1. What is the difference between a person who is saved and a person who is not? Is it simply that a person who is saved believes certain things that an unsaved person does not? If there’s more, then what is the difference?

2. How are repentance and faith possible for a person who is dead in trespasses and sins? The Bible says that the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). How can repentance and faith come from a deceitful, wicked heart?

3. What has happened to you that could only be explained by an intervention of God’s power? The Gospel is the *power* of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). What has happened to you that could only be explained by an intervention of God’s power?

The answer to all these questions is regeneration. Regeneration is the work of God’s Holy Spirit by which He has changed your soul so that with a new mind, heart and will, you trust Him, love Him, and follow Him gladly. The Bible speaks about this intervention of God in several different ways, so let’s begin by looking at the language of regeneration.

1. Regeneration Is a Bible Word and Theme

You will find the word in Titus 3, “...when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 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, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:4–6).

Notice how God saved us. It was by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit and all of this is the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Savior.

The other place in the Bible where this word regeneration is used, is in Matthew 19, where Jesus says, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve

tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28 NASB). Other translations say, “in the new world” or “at the renewal of all things.”

Jesus is speaking about the new heaven and the new earth, and the word He uses to describe this transformation is ‘the regeneration’. That tells us a lot about the meaning of this word. Regeneration involves taking something—in this case the planet—that has been devastated by sin, and making it new so that it reflects the glory of God.

And this is the word that the Bible uses to describe God’s work in you. If you are in Christ, then what God will one day do for this planet; He has already done in you! The word ‘regeneration’ occurs just twice in the Bible, but regeneration is a major Bible theme. The Bible speaks about regeneration in four ways: new birth, new creation, new life, and new heart.

a. New Birth

Regeneration is a new birth. Jesus said, “...*unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3). “*You must be born again*” (John 3:7). To be born again is to receive an infusion of new life that comes from God Himself. And Jesus tells us that this new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit. “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8).

The Spirit of God brings us to new birth. But how does the Holy Spirit do this? The Spirit of God regenerates sinners through the Word of God. Peter tells us, “*you have been **born again**, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, **through the living and abiding word of God***” (1 Peter 1:23).

Peter is using the analogy of how human life begins. The living seed comes, and in a moment, a new life is conceived. The seed does not always bring new life, but there is no new life without the seed. The Holy Spirit brings us to new birth through the living seed of the Word of God.

It follows that if we want people to be born again, the best thing we can do is to open the Bible with them. Get the living seed of the Word of God into their lives and pray that the Holy Spirit will bring new life from the seed.

b. New Creation

Another way in which the Bible describes this miracle is a new creation. “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; the new has come*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). God made you. He knit you together in your mother’s womb. But as we saw last time all of us are affected by sin in every area of our lives.

When God regenerated you, He did a new creative work in you, in which He opened your mind, softened your heart, and redirected your will. You are no longer the person you used to be, you are a new creation in Christ.

c. New Life

“*God, who is rich in mercy, **made us alive** with Christ even when we were dead in trans-*

gressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5 NIV). If you are in Christ, this is what has happened to you. God made you alive! By nature, you were unresponsive to God, but God has regenerated you by breathing new life into your soul.

d. New Heart

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

The heart you were born with loved the wrong things. By nature, we were lovers of self rather than lovers of God, but God has given you a new heart. That is why you love Him, trust Him, and want to serve Him.

Although the word regeneration is only found twice in Scripture, the truth of regeneration is all over the Bible. This is a really important Bible doctrine and grasping it will be of great help to you and to the people you lead.

2. Regeneration Is God’s Work

God says, *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ezekiel 36:26).

Regeneration is God’s work. But how does God’s work of regeneration relate to our work which is to repent and to believe the gospel?

Listen to what John says about what God does and what we do: *“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”* (John 1:12 NIV).

Let’s pause there for a moment. Notice the clear statements of what we must do: we must receive Jesus, and we do that by believing in His name. *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”* (Acts 16:31).

But John is not done. He goes on to say, that we who receive Jesus by believing in His name are *“children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God”* (John 1:13 NIV). God regenerates us and we receive Jesus by believing in His name. God breathes new life into us, and we begin a new life of trusting, loving, and serving Jesus. These things go together. You never have the one without the other. Everyone who believes has been regenerated. Everyone who has been regenerated believes.

Which of these goes first? Well Christians have debated that over many centuries. But it seems clear to me that if we take what we have learned about how we are ruined by sin seriously, it follows that the way we are saved is that God opens our blind eyes so that we grasp and believe the truth. God changes our hard hearts so that we come to love Him. God bends our stubborn wills so that we desire to serve Him. Behind our believing, lies the miracle of God’s regenerating grace. There’s an old illustration that I’ve found helpful here.

Think about a sunrise. When the sun comes up in the morning, there is light. These two things happen together, never the one without the other. If you watch a sunrise, you might say, “It is

light because the sun has risen.” You would not say, “the sun has risen because it is light.” Light comes when the sun rises, not the other way round.

Regeneration is like the sun rising. Faith is like the light that it brings. Behind our believing lies the miracle of God’s regenerating grace.

3. Regeneration Has Changed You

We saw in our last session that sin has defaced every part of our being. Our minds were darkened. Our affections were distorted. Our wills were disabled. Regeneration is God’s work in which He has changed your soul so that with a new mind, heart and will, you trust Him, love Him, and follow Him gladly.

a. When God regenerated you, He opened your mind.

What Paul says is true of you. *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”* (2 Corinthians 4:6).

b. When God regenerated you, He changed your heart.

What Peter said of the first believers is true of you. *“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory”* (1 Peter 1:8).

c. When God regenerated you, He redirected your will.

What Paul says to the Corinthians is true of you. *“So we make it our goal to please him whether we are at home in the body or away from it”* (2 Corinthians 5:9 NIV).

What changed in regeneration? You did! God intervened in your life. He made you a new creation in Jesus Christ. You are no longer the person you used to be.

What Does Not Change in Regeneration

It’s important to say a word about what does not change in regeneration. Regeneration does not change your temperament. God created you. He made you with your own unique gifts, personality, and temperament. And the new birth does not violate what God has made.

Shy sinners become shy Christians. Creative sinners become creative Christians. Strong-willed sinners become strong-willed Christians. You see that in Saul of Tarsus. He was a passionate, articulate, driving, relentless leader before he came to Christ. And when God regenerated him, he redirected what had been used in the service of evil and used it for the advance of the gospel around the world.

God never makes two snowflakes the same and He certainly never makes two Christians the same. When God regenerated you, He moved you in a new direction. You are made new, but you are still you! So don’t lose your joy in following Jesus by trying to be someone else. God did not make us unique in creation just to make us the same in redemption. His purpose is to create a unique reflection of Jesus Christ in you.

4. Regeneration Is a Completed Event

Let's take a moment to put this wonderful truth of regeneration into context. I've found it helpful to think of our salvation in three stages: Christ's completed work, Christ's continuing work, and Christ's coming work.

I also find it helpful to make a distinction between what Jesus has done for us and what Jesus us has done in us.

	Christ's Completed Work	Christ's Continuing Work	Christ's Coming Work
For Us	Redemption	Intercession	Resurrection
In Us	Regeneration	Sanctification	Glorification

Putting these together we can say that **redemption** is Christ's completed work for us. Christ redeemed us by the shedding of His blood. **Regeneration** is Christ's completed work in us.

Regeneration is distinct from **sanctification**, which is Christ's continuing work in us. Think about the difference between birth and growth. Birth is a completed event. We have been born again. Growth is a continuing process. We are growing up in the Lord. The continuing work of Jesus for us is His **intercession**. Right now, He is at the right hand of the Father. Our Savior is where we need Him to be, and we can be sure that we will have all that we need for all that we face, because Jesus speaks to the Father on our behalf.

And when Christ comes again in power and glory His great work for us will be **resurrection**. We will receive new bodies, like His resurrection body, adapted to eternal life. And Christ's great work in us will be **glorification**, in which He will remove every trace of sin's presence from every part of our being. You will never sin, and you will never be inclined to sin. When you see Jesus, you will be like Him.

Regeneration, like birth, is a completed event. Sanctification is the growth of the life that began in regeneration. Most Christians are more familiar with the continuing process of sanctification than with the completed event of regeneration. It is natural for a believer to say, "God is changing me." But we hesitate to say, "God has changed me," because we know we still have a lot more changing to do! But the doctrine of regeneration reminds us that God has changed us. God has opened your eyes. God has changed your heart, God's Spirit dwells in you. You are no longer the person you once were. So let me end by encouraging you with seven Scriptures that speak of Christ's completed work in you.

a. 2 Corinthians 5:17

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come!

He doesn't say, "If anyone is in Christ, he is becoming a new creation." He does not say the old is going away and the new is gradually forming. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come. He is not describing a process. He is describing something that has happened to all who are in Christ.

b. Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

This is what has happened. It's a done deal. This is the truth about you as a believer. Christ lives in you!

c. Colossians 3:1

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

This is what has happened to you. If you are a believer, you have been raised with Christ. The resurrection life of Jesus is in you!

d. 1 Corinthians 6:19

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?

Again, notice he does not say "your body is becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit." Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. If you are in Christ, the Holy Spirit lives in you. His presence makes the Christian life possible for you.

e. Ephesians 5:8

...at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.

Notice 'You *were* darkness,' now 'you *are* light.' Your nature has changed. Notice how Paul brings regeneration and sanctification together here. You are light (that's regeneration), so live as light (that's sanctification).

f. Romans 6:22

...you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God.

We all sin and fail in many ways. But Paul says, "*You have been set free from sin.*" You are no longer sin's prisoner. Sin is still your enemy, but it is no longer your master. Christ has set you free and now you are in a position to put up a fight.

g. 1 Peter 1:23

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

The language of birth is the language of a completed event. Regeneration, like birth is Christ's completed work in you. Sanctification, like growth is Christ's continuing work in you.

Conclusion

We began with three questions to which regeneration is the answer.

1. What is the difference between a person who believes and a person who does not?

The answer is regeneration. A person who believes has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit of God. You were blind and God opened your eyes. You were bound and God set you free. You were dead and God raised you up. That is an amazing miracle to grace! And however simple the story of your journey to faith, this is what God has done in you.

2. How are repentance and faith possible for a person who is dead in trespasses and sins?

Again, the answer is regeneration. You have been given a new heart, a new birth, new life. You are a new creation in Jesus Christ.

3. What has happened to you that could only be explained by an intervention of God's power?

The answer is regeneration. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, if you love Him, and have a desire to serve Him, you can be confident that God has saved you by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

So be encouraged. God has intervened in your life. You may have many battles, but you are not who you were before. You are a new creation in Jesus Christ.

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