Today we begin a new subsection in our discussion of the doctrine of salvation on regeneration or the new birth. What do we mean when we talk about regeneration or being born again? “Regeneration” can be defined as *the act of the Holy Spirit whereby one becomes spiritually alive and a child of God.*

The new birth is mentioned in the New Testament in a couple of places. For example, John 1:12-13 is an important passage. John says,

But to all who received him [that is, Christ], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Here John refers to that supernatural birth whereby one becomes God’s child.

And as you’re probably aware, over in John 3 we have a long discourse on the new birth between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Let’s turn to John 3 and read John 3:1ff.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ 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 every one who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can this be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”
Here Jesus describes to Nicodemus a birth that is not fleshly but rather spiritual, wrought by the Holy Spirit and in virtue of which one comes into the Kingdom of God. Indeed, Jesus says you cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless you have this spiritual new birth.

The theological term for the new birth is *regeneration.* It means literally to be born again; not generated once but regenerated – reborn. So the definition of “regeneration,” then, is an act of the Holy Spirit whereby a person becomes spiritual alive and a child of God. Based on what we have seen in previous lessons, it is evident that regeneration actualizes our mystical union with Christ.

How can we characterize this new birth or regeneration that is wrought by the Holy Spirit?

1. *In virtue of the new birth, you become a new creation.* In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes, “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” So insofar as we are united with Christ through the new birth, through regeneration, we become a new creation. That doesn’t mean that you are no longer the same person that you were prior to your rebirth. You are the same person in terms of numerical identity. That is why you can say, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” It is the same person but that person was once unregenerate and now has become regenerate in light of his new birth. Therefore, everything is new for that person. The slate has been wiped clean. Your guilt has been expiated. Your sins have been forgiven. You are freed from them. You start over. You have a new life. So this is a tremendous truth that Christians should relish and rejoice in. It is not just that God has forgiven you but that everything starts over for you. Recall all the benefits and new status you have in virtue of being in Christ! Now you begin to write a new chapter of your life. So when you are born again, you are more than just an unregenerate person and now a regenerate person; rather everything starts over and you become a new creation in Christ.

2. *Rebirth involves an immediate relationship with Christ and with God.* In 1 Peter 1:3-5, Peter says,

   Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Here Peter says that it is by God’s mercy that we have been born anew into this living hope in which we stand and to the inheritance in heaven that we have waiting for us. So when we are born again by the Holy Spirit, we are placed into a new relationship with God which gives us a vital hope for the future that extends beyond the grave.
3. *This relationship is eternal.* Notice what Peter says about it. “You have been born anew to a living hope and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” Then he says you will be kept by God’s power until you take hold of this inheritance which is reserved for you in heaven. This is not a relationship that is temporary. Nor is it one that begins when you die. It begins right now. You have been born anew, you are a new creation, and you now enjoy this relationship with God that will last forever.

If we go back to the Gospel of John, look at John 3:16 – the sentence just following the passage we just read – John goes on to comment, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” So as a result of the new birth, you are brought into a relationship with God which gives you everlasting life.

4. As a new creation, in this new relationship with God, we *have freedom from sin.* 1 John 1:7-9, John says,

> ... if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So as we abide in Christ, we have access to God’s forgiveness. God doesn’t simply forgive all of our past sins, rather as we walk in the light – as we walk with him – when we do stumble, we can come to God in confession, and he is faithful and will forgive our sins and cleanse us.

Now some people say that when you become a Christian, God forgives not only your past sins, and your present sins, but also your future sins. I realize that this is very frequently said on a popular level, but if you think about it it is rather strange – how can a sin be forgiven that you have not committed? – unless you are a tenseless time theorist – right?– and you believe that you are somehow out there in the future and committing those sins. But if you think that temporal becoming is real and the future is unreal, then it doesn’t exist, and so there aren’t any such sins. Certainly we all want to affirm that God foreknows the sins that you will commit. That is certainly true. But can you be guilty of a sin that you haven’t committed? Granted, you are going to commit it. Then you will be guilty once you commit it. We agree on that. But can I actually be guilty for something I haven’t done? That is hard to see. And if I’m not guilty of it, then how could I be forgiven for it? I think that what people are trying to express here is that Christ’s death is sufficient to cover all your sins past, present, and future. His atoning death is a sufficient sacrifice to cover every sin. That’s why when you commit more sins or new sins there doesn’t need to be an additional sacrifice. You don’t need to have Christ die again or offer
something else. The one sacrifice is good for all of these sins for all time. But it does seem to me that John is saying that we need to appropriate that sacrificial death by coming to God, confessing our sins, and asking him to forgive us when we commit them. So I think that Christ’s atoning death is sufficient to cover every sin past, present, and future, but that doesn’t mean that when I come to Christ I am forgiven for sins I haven’t committed.

So we need to practice in the Christian life continually coming before God in confession, repentance, and then accepting his cleansing and forgiving in our lives. We need to keep short accounts with God. Don’t allow your sins to pile up lest you drift away from God. Rather as soon as you become aware of something that is wrong in your life, confess it immediately and claim God’s forgiveness and cleansing.

John goes on in chapter 3 to say that, having become regenerate Christians, we don’t need to keep on sinning. We are freed from the bondage to sin. We are free now not to practice sin. 1 John 3:6-9 says,

No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.

Now does John mean that once you are born of God – once you are a regenerate Christian – that you will live a sinless life? Evidently not! We have already seen back in chapter 1 he says that if we say we have no sin, we lie and the truth is not in us. He says therefore you need to confess your sins and claim God’s forgiveness and cleansing. Rather the present tense of the verbs here indicates that no regenerate Christian can live a lifestyle of sin. No one who is born of God just goes on repeatedly committing sin, living a life of sin. No one who is born of God practices sin because God’s nature abides in him, and therefore he is regenerate and will be living a new life free from the bondage of sin. That doesn’t mean that he will never fall, but when he does fall he can bring that to God in confession and be forgiven and cleansed.

So once a person is a regenerate Christian, there should be evidence of that fact in a change of lifestyle. I think what John is excluding here would be someone who says, “Oh, yes, when I was eight-years old I responded to an altar call at our church” then he’s lived life like the devil ever since then. I think John would say that such a person has no right to think that he is a regenerate Christian. He can have no assurance of the forgiveness of his sins. It is not enough just to have made a confession at some point earlier in your life if it hasn’t wrought any effect in your life. A person who is truly born
of God is now indwelt with the divine nature and therefore this ought to work itself out in some difference in his life – a freedom from the bondage of sin in that person’s life.

So regeneration is related to justification in that the former is experiential and the latter is forensic or legal. Regeneration is experiential – an actual change that takes place in you. You are revived through the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. By contrast, as we shall see, justification is a forensic event, a matter of what God declares. He declares you to be righteous. You are then a baby Christian still advancing toward righteousness in your life. Being justified or declared righteous doesn’t mean that you suddenly become righteous in an experiential sense. So I would see regeneration and justification as co-incident but belonging to two different orders of things. The one is experiential and involves an actual change as an event. The other is forensic and legal. That doesn’t mean it’s not real, but it is a declared righteousness. We’ll talk more about that when we get to justification.

So as born again Christians we are no longer in bondage to sin, we have the freedom now to live lives that are free of sin even if on occasion we do stumble and fall. And when we do, then we need to practice confession to claim God’s forgiveness and cleansing.

5. Finally, this new birth is available to anyone. In John 3:3, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This is available to anyone who will come to Christ, to be born anew, and that will then give him membership in God’s Kingdom.

In our lesson next week we’ll talk further about the nature of regeneration – what it is and what it is not. Until then, may God guide you and give you a great week.¹

¹ Total Running Time: 21:46 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)