

**§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation**  
**Lecture 11**  
**How Regeneration Occurs**

We've been talking about the doctrine of regeneration, or what is popularly called the new birth. Last time we saw what was involved in the nature of regeneration. Today we want to wrap up this section before we turn to the subject of justification.

Let's turn again to John chapter 3, the classic New Testament passage on the new birth – Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus. I want to say a few words about what the new birth is *not*, based on this passage.

First, it's clear that *the new birth is not a matter of religious heritage*. In verse 1 it tells us, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." This man had a tremendous religious pedigree. He was a member of a religious order within Judaism that was extremely strict. They were meticulous about observing the Old Testament law. Yet it was to this man that Jesus said, "You need to be born anew in order to see the Kingdom of God." So it is not enough just to have a particular denominational background or religious heritage in order to be a regenerate Christian.

Second, by the same token, it is clear that *rebirth is not something that is biologically inheritable or something that is a matter of one's family*. In verse 4, Nicodemus says, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" This is probably intended to be a pretty sarcastic remark on Nicodemus' part. Nicodemus isn't serious here. He's really ridiculing – mocking – what Jesus said. Jesus in turn 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." So this is a spiritual rebirth. It is not a matter of biology or family inheritance.

Third, *rebirth is not a physical process*. Notice that Jesus says, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." It is your spirit that is regenerated, which is born anew, by the Holy Spirit, so that what was once dead is now alive and in fellowship and communion with God. So this is an inner spiritual quickening that enlivens the spiritual element in a person and puts him into a right relationship with God.

Fourth, *rebirth is not something that is granted by human beings*. Jesus goes on to say in verses 7-8, "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." It is the Holy Spirit who sovereignly bestows the new birth. It is not something that is granted by human beings; it is no more under the control of human beings than is the wind. Rather, this is something that God does.

Finally, *rebirth is not just a matter of right doctrine or head knowledge*. In verses 10-11 Jesus says, “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.” Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel. He was trained in Old Testament law. Yet, he was an unregenerate man. Head knowledge is not enough to ensure a genuine rebirth of the spirit and a right relationship with God.

So this new birth – regeneration – is something that is not a matter of religious heritage, not inheritable biologically or from one’s family, not a physical process, not under human control, and not a matter of simply believing intellectually right doctrine.

So how does the new birth work? How does regeneration occur? How is one born anew? Let’s look at a couple of passages that are relevant to these questions. First is John 1:12-13, just a couple of pages over from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Here John writes,

But to all who received him, 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 we have the spiritual rebirth that Jesus describes in his conversation with Nicodemus. It is something that comes from God and is given to everyone who welcomes Christ and believes in his name.

Second, look at Titus 3:3-7. Titus 3:3-7 is a wonderful passage describing our salvation. Paul says,

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.

What do we learn from these two passages about the new birth and how one comes to be a regenerate Christian?

First notice that it is open to all people. John says “to all who received him.” To everyone who believed in his name, he gave this privilege to become God’s children. So this is an open invitation to everyone.

And the first step to take is *repentance*. In Titus, Paul talks about how we once lived under the slavery of passion and sin, malice and envy, hating others and hated by them. It

is from this life of sin that one must turn. That is what repentance means. It means to turn your back on that life and turn toward God for forgiveness and cleansing. So the first step toward being born again is repentance, turning away from the old life, and turning now to God.

The next step is *placing one's faith in Christ*. John says in verse 12, "To all who received him, who believed in his name." So having repented of sin, one turns to God and places one's faith in Jesus Christ. It is not enough just to give intellectual assent to Christian doctrines about Christ. It is not enough to believe *that* Jesus was the Son of God, *that* Jesus died on the cross for my sins, *that* God raised him from the dead. True, all of these things must be believed. But that is not sufficient for saving faith. Notice that it says here, "They believed in his name." It is not just a matter of believing propositional truths about Christ. It is believing *in Christ*. It is trusting in him, committing your life to him. This is the full concept of saving faith: not just intellectual assent to doctrines about Christ, but trusting in him personally; placing your faith in him.

Notice that John says that those who believed in his name "received Christ." And by that he means they welcomed him. They welcomed Christ as their Savior and their Lord. By so doing, by placing one's faith in Christ, by believing in him and welcoming him into your life, you receive the Holy Spirit of Christ and are born again. Remember what Titus says. He says, "He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit whom he poured out upon us richly." So when a person believes in Jesus Christ and welcomes him into his life, the Holy Spirit comes into that person and regenerates his spirit. That dead spirit that was previously darkened and alienated from God is now quickened and comes alive and comes into a relationship with God.

This may be a little confusing to some of you because we often hear about the need to receive Christ, rather than to receive the Holy Spirit. But I think that the idiom of "receiving Christ" is just a way of saying what is technically receiving the Holy Spirit. Look at Romans 8:9-10. In Romans 8:9-10, we see that the Holy Spirit comes in the place of Christ while Christ is absent from this universe, having ascended into heaven. The Holy Spirit who comes in the place of Christ and continues his ministry becomes so closely identified with Christ that he is referred to as Christ. Paul writes,

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.

This is a description of the regenerate Christian – someone whose spirit is alive because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Notice the progression in Paul's references to the Holy Spirit. He first says "the Spirit of God," then "the Spirit of Christ," and finally simply

“Christ.” The Holy Spirit is so closely identified with Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit, indwelling the believer, living within us and quickening our spirits, is referred to as Christ. So when you receive the Holy Spirit, you are, so to speak, receiving Christ because the Holy Spirit continues the ministry of Jesus Christ.

When one receives the Holy Spirit, then one is born anew – one is regenerated – into a new living relationship with God. One becomes united with Christ, as we saw in our previous study about our mystical union with Christ, and heir to all of the promises that belong to those in Christ.

So this is a transformation that is available to anyone who will turn in repentance away from sin and to Christ in faith, believe in his name, and welcome him into that person’s life, and thereby receive the Holy Spirit of Christ who will regenerate him and transform him from the inside out and so change his life.

Now, it may be the case that there is someone watching today who has never come to know God in that way, who has never been born again. If you are not sure that you are a regenerate Christian, I want to give you a chance now to make that sort of commitment at this time. There is no sort of recipe for doing this, but I think it is entirely appropriate to come to God in prayer and to talk to him about it and to ask him to come into your life, to give you the Holy Spirit, and to regenerate you. So what I’d like to do now is to pause and take a moment to have such a prayer of invitation for anyone who would like to pray it silently along with me. Let’s pray:

Lord Jesus, I really need you. I recognize that I’ve made a mess of my life and that by my wrongdoing I have sinned against you. I believe that you came and died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin and that you rose from the dead to prove who you are. Right now, in the best way I know how, I open the door to my life and I welcome you to come in as my Savior and my Lord. Come into my life. Forgive my sins. Cleanse me of my sins and transform me to make me into the kind of person you want me to be. Send me your Holy Spirit to quicken my spirit and make me alive to a new relationship with you. Right now, as an expression of my faith, I thank you for hearing this prayer and answering it. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, then I can give you assurance, based on Scripture, that God has heard that prayer and he answers that prayer to come into your life. I would encourage you now to begin to look for signs of that renewed spirit within you. The Bible says that when we become regenerate Christians, we are like little infants and so we need to be nourished by the milk of the Word of God which is the Bible. So you should begin to pray regularly, to read the Bible on a regular basis, and to be nourished by it. You don’t arrive in the Christian life stillborn. Rather, like a little baby, you begin to grow and

become stronger in your Christian life, as you are nourished and as you walk with him. I hope that these Defenders lessons will be of help to you as you do.

Next time we are going to turn to the subject of justification. Until then, have a great week.<sup>1</sup>

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