

What We Believe, Part 6: Regeneration

Ezekiel 37:1 ESV (Pg. 422) The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. **2** And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. **3** And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” **4** Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. **5** Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. **6** And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” **7** So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. **8** And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. **9** Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” **10** So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

We believe that man was created by God in his own image; that he sinned and thereby incurred physical, spiritual and eternal death, which is separation from God; that as a consequence, all human beings are born with a sinful nature and are sinners by choice and therefore under condemnation. We believe that those who repent and forsake sin and trust Jesus Christ as Savior have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and have become new creatures, delivered from condemnation and are recipients of eternal life.

- I. We have been taking a look at all of the essential doctrines that govern the teachings of NRLC. We started with the authority of Scripture, and then spent four weeks considering the truth about the nature of God: the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Today we’re moving into the part of this series concerning the application of these truths we’ve learned about the Bible and God to our day-to-day existence. We begin with the Biblical doctrine of **Regeneration**.
 - A. For some of you this may be a new word. What does regeneration mean? Simply put...
 1. The prefix “re” means again, and to “generate” means “to become” or “to happen”.¹ Therefore, the literal meaning of the term is to “become again” or to “happen again.” But what is happening again? What are we becoming again?
 2. Regeneration is “The mighty work of God by which unbelievers are given a new nature, being born again... It is both (1) the removal of one’s old sinful nature, and (2) the imparting of a new nature that is responsive to God.”²

¹ R.C. Sproul; *What Does It Mean to be Born Again?* (Crucial Questions Book 6), Pg. 18; Reformation Trust Publishing. Kindle Edition.

² Gregg R. Allison; *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Pg.181; © 2016 Baker Books

- B. One of the clearest instances of the Bible's teaching on regeneration is found in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a ruler and teacher of the Jews. **John 3:3 ESV** Jesus answered 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? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" **5** Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said to you, '**You must be born again.**' **8** 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."
1. Christ is saying that in our current fallen state, we are unable to understand, experience, or even appreciate the things of God. Therefore, if anyone is to have any hope of "seeing" or "entering" the kingdom of God, he must be **born again**...or regenerated.
 2. Notice that Christ doesn't tell him to do something, or even to believe something. There's nothing he can do at all! On the contrary, in order to see or enter the Kingdom, Christ says that something must happen to him.
- C. Nicodemus isn't disadvantaged like we have been in our church culture by being bombarded with the term "born again", so that the radical nature of the idea is not dulled in his mind by his familiarity with it, and therefore he asks a logical question: "**How can this be?**"
- D. In my humble opinion, the late Dr. R.C. Sproul was one of the finest (and most precise) Bible teachers of the last 100 years.
1. He wrote a booklet entitled, "What does it Mean to be Born Again?" (available for free on Kindle). In it, he outlined 6 things we need to remember as we consider what Jesus said about our need to be born again (or regenerated).
 2. He says regeneration is necessary, a mystery, only the beginning, a sovereign work, immediate and permanent³. Instead of "reinventing the wheel", I am going to borrow his outline in order to explore this truth with you.
- II. Dr Sproul begins by pointing out that Regeneration is **absolutely necessary**. Jesus could not have been clearer: "**You must be born again.**" There is no other way to know God and experience his presence, power and salvation. Dr. Sproul says: "To put it as simply as I can, if you are not spiritually reborn, you are not a Christian."⁴ Being "born again", then, is the indispensable first step to truly being a Christian.
- A. But why is this the case? Because as Jesus told Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The differences between our natural (fleshly) person, and that which is born of the Spirit is dramatic in ways that we cannot fully appreciate in our present condition.
 - B. **Romans 8:5a ESV** For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh...**6a For to set the mind on the flesh is death...****7** For the mind that is set on the flesh is **hostile to God**, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. **8** Those who are in the flesh **cannot please God**.

³ R.C. Sproul; *What Does It Mean to be Born Again?* (Crucial Questions Book 6), Pg. 59; Reformation Trust Publishing. Kindle Edition.

⁴ *ibid.* (pg 8)

1. Before being born again, our minds are “set” on the flesh
 - a) According to Paul, this make us as spiritually dead as the pile of bones Ezekiel saw in his vision.
 - b) It means to obsess over and worship temporal things, surface things, destructive things, selfish things. And it cannot be otherwise!
 2. 1 John 2 describes the 3 categories of sin: The lust of the flesh (what my physical being demands: all it’s addictions, ranging form food, sex, drugs, and alcohol to popularity, power, etc.); the lust of the eyes (what I see or imagine and strive to acquire, whether possible or not); and the pride of life (a worldview centered on me, and my desire to dethrone God).
- C. That’s why Paul described our pre-Christian condition in Ephesians 2 as “dead in...trespasses and sins” saying “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and (because of this, we) were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”
1. Don’t underestimate the impact that your sin has had on you! You aren’t just making occasional mistakes! As the coroner of Munchkinland told Dorothy about the Wicked Witch of the East, “You weren’t only merely dead; you were really, most sincerely dead.”
 2. But you might protest, “I’m not a drug addict, thief, child molester, murderer, or politician! I kiss my mama, stand up for Old Glory, and don’t cheat others. I’m a good person!”
 - a) Let me describe it this way...somewhere in the world, seconds ago, a beautiful teenaged girl, with friends and popularity and a bright future just died. Maybe it was a wreck, or from a sudden illness. I don’t know.
 - b) But if we saw her lying there, seconds after the fact, how dead do you think she’d look? Maybe she’d fixed her hair just right and put on a beautiful dress. Maybe she had just touched up her make-up. At first appearance, she looks great! There’s no decomposition taking over her body yet. She looks as if she could simply awaken...but she’s still clinically dead.
 - c) Let me ask: how “less dead” is she than some guy who’s been rotting away, worm-eaten in a mausoleum for the last five years? Dead is dead! The comparative appearance of the two is immaterial. Neither are breathing. The heart of neither is pumping.
 3. If you are not born again, whether you seem to be squeaky clean, or you are the most vile scum of the earth (whose sins are very public), you are dead! Spiritually, you are no better off than those dry bones we read about, bleaching on the desert floor that the Prophet saw. “You must be born again!”
- III. So regeneration is necessary. But it is also a mystery. Jesus compared this activity of the Holy Spirit to the blowing of the wind, saying, “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.”
- A. That’s why when God asked the prophet, “Son of man, can these bones live?” his reply was “O Lord God, you know.” It’s a mystery.
 - B. It is mysterious in who it affects unto salvation. Why is it that some “good” people die, having rejected Christ all of there lives, while testimony after testimony tells

- of some reprobate sinner who God awakened to new life just in the nick of time? It's a mystery, known only to God!
- C. But it is mysterious in another way. Let's do a little "audience participation" To demonstrate what I mean.
1. Raise your hand if you know for certain the exact moment and place where you became a follower of Jesus Christ. Everyone look around.
 2. Now raise your hand if you are **convinced** that you are a believer, but you cannot pinpoint when and where that spiritual transaction occurred.
- D. Is the second group lying? Do you have to be able to nail down the moment, and present some sort of documentation in order to be counted as a believer? No! Why? Because we are dealing with the supernatural; something that has been done to us and in us, apart from us...something mysterious!
1. Can you remember your natural birth? Then how can you prove that you're alive? By the ongoing activity of respiration, the circulation of your blood, by cognitive reasoning, etc. You know you're alive by the presence of life.
 2. Similarly, You know you believe, not by Baptism certificates, church membership, etc.; but by the presence of belief, and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Are your actions, attitudes, and priorities becoming more pleasing to Christ daily? If so, that is very good evidence of resident new life.
- IV. And that leads us to our next observation. Regeneration is only the beginning. Just as a newborn baby begins to grow, learn and develop; when the Holy Spirit makes us alive to Christ, we are just getting started. When Ezekiel see the bones rattle together and take on muscles, organs, and skin, the miracle was just beginning.
- A. The moment of belief is also only the beginning. It is sad to me when I see someone who thinks they are saved because of a beginning but that has no interest in the Bible, the corporate worship of the church, the fellowship of believers, etc.
- B. True faith is **validated** by growth in personal holiness, connection to the Body of Christ, sacrificial living, love of the Scriptures and humility. Living right doesn't make you saved, but if you're truly saved, you're going to live increasingly right.
- V. Regeneration is not only necessary, mysterious, and the beginning, but it is also a sovereign work of God. This should be obvious when you consider that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. The dry bones were not alive, even with muscles, organs, and skin until the breath entered them (Holy Spirit - "ruach"; wind, breath)
- A. Salvation never happens until the Spirit moves. Take note of this as the most alarming aspect of this doctrine; the fact that regeneration precedes faith⁵. Everything begins with God.
1. In other words, regeneration is not to be understood as God standing apart from us, gently persuading us to come to him until we make the first move. Rather. the Bible teaches that God "invades the soul" in order to work a "substantive change in the heart"⁶ so that we can come to Christ.
 - a) **Ephesians 2:4 ESV** But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, **5** even when we were dead in our

⁵ ibid. pg 37

⁶ ibid. pg 38

trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

- b) When did God make us alive? “even when we were dead in our trespasses.”
2. None of us could have come to the cross of Christ on our own power. God had to overcome our spiritual deadness, and enable us to respond to him.
 - a) **Romans 8:30 ESV** And those whom he *predestined* he also *called*, and those whom he called he also *justified*, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
 - b) Two things had to happen *before* you were justified (saved): First, God chose or predestined you. Next he called or regenerated you (you were born again). Only then could you respond to his call and be saved. God had to act first or you would have had no hope of salvation.
- B. When it comes to God’s saving work, NRLC holds to a concept called “monergism” (mon -“one”; erg - “a unit of labor”). It means that we believe that all the work of bringing you to salvation, getting you saved, and keeping you saved is done by only one; and that One is God alone. This is opposed to “synergism”, which holds that two or more are doing the work - in this case, you and God.
 1. The Bible is clear throughout that we were both unable to save ourselves, and uninterested in being saved. God had to enable us, against our stubborn will, to come to him in faith and belief in order that we might be rescued.
 2. That is not to say that there is no place in Christian theology for synergism. After God regenerates us, we must use our will to repent and believe. It is also vital to our sanctification (growth in holiness).
 - a) After we are regenerated, we must cooperate with God by using our will to choose to obey, trust his Word, and pray in faith, for example.
 - b) But even then, Paul reminds us **Philippians 2:13 ESV** it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
- VI. So we have seen that regeneration is necessary, mysterious, only the beginning, and a sovereign work of God. Now consider with me that regeneration is also immediate.
 - A. “You’re either spiritually dead or you’re alive to the things of God. You’re either unregenerate or regenerate. There is no in-between state. It’s like pregnancy; no one is almost pregnant. Likewise, no one is almost regenerate. You either are or you aren’t.”⁷ -R.C. Sproul
 - B. When we say that regeneration is immediate, we are not just talking about passing time; in fact, we mean two things.
 1. First, regeneration is instantaneous. This means that there is an exact moment when God awakens you to the fact that you are a sinner, and that it ain’t working for you. You may not be able to remember that moment, or recognize it, but when it happens, it happens. When the Breath of God entered the bodies that were once dry bones, immediately “they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

⁷ *ibid.* pp. 49-50

2. Second, immediate regeneration means that God doesn't require means to awaken us spiritually. There is no certain prayer, church ceremony or rite, is necessary, but that God himself does the regenerating. **Ephesians 2:8 ESV** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And **this is not your own doing**; it is the **gift of God, 9 not a result of works**, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are **his workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for good works, **which God prepared** beforehand, that we should walk in them.

VII. Lastly, regeneration is permanent. Knowing that my salvation is a gift from God is the confidence that I can't lose or screw up what I didn't obtain for myself. **Philippians 1:6 ESV** And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

- A. Praise God for his unimaginable faithfulness! Think of all the times you've failed him, all of the times when you least deserved his goodness. Think of the times that you have chased and committed various sins, and made a mockery of his suffering on the cross and yet, he has remained faithful.
- B. You are still shielded by his righteousness and mercy. He is still pursuing you with his love and blessing. You are still the chosen, elect apple of his eye. Jesus said in John 10 that there is no one who could snatch you from his hand!
 1. **Lamentations 3:22 ESV** "The steadfast love of the Lord **never ceases**; his mercies **never come to an end**; **23** they are **new every morning**; **great is your faithfulness. 24** "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
 2. As Paul sang earlier, he is the "God that saves!" Aren't you glad. Let's thank him that, as Peter said, we have been born again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead this morning!
- C. And if you haven't ever put your trust in Jesus, why not let today be the day? Perhaps you've had a tug on your heart this morning. That is God awakening you to believe.
 1. You say, "How will I know for sure?" Let me ask, do you believe? Can you at least look to him and consider his claims? Can you ask some questions or check out a Bible and see if he is who he says he is?
 2. If you answered yes to any of those questions, than you can know for sure that he is working in you. Run to him today.