

Salvation "Regeneration" John 3:3-8; 1 Peter 1:3

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Recently I've been reading a book by Leonard Sweet called *Jesus Manifesto*. In it he tells the story of a French pastor who was called to serve in a small French community—maybe much like ours. At one of the first homes he visited, the wife was away, so the pastor could only talk with the husband.
- When the wife returned, she probed her husband about the new pastor's visit: "What did he say?" she asked. "He asked, 'Does Christ live here?'" the husband replied. "He didn't really ask anything else. Just, 'Does Christ live here?'"
- "Well, surely you told him that we are the church's biggest supporters." "He didn't ask that," the husband repeated. "He only asked, 'Does Christ live here?'"
- "Well, you must have told him that we read our Bibles and say our prayers every day." "He didn't ask about that either. He only asked, 'Does Christ live here?'"
- "Well, did you tell him that we attend his services every Sunday and sit in the front?" the wife persisted. "He didn't ask about that. He only wanted to know, 'Does Christ live here?'"¹
- One of the problems Jesus constantly dealt with was the problem of spiritual forgeries. Frankly, it's no different now, here, among us. It's the reason for the French pastor's question. Spiritual forgeries, religious people who do religious things and speak religious words and attend religious services and go to LifeGroups and make disciples and give religiously and even pastor churches but who are missing the spiritual life of Christ on the inside. Christ must be alive in you. It doesn't matter what you give. It doesn't matter how much time you spend serving various causes. None of this stuff matters if the life of Christ has not first been birthed in you on the inside. "Does Christ live----here?"
- Jesus dealt with the problem of spiritual forgeries by calling their bluff. He called them out. He cried counterfeit! In **Matthew 23:27** Jesus called them whitewashed tombs. On the outside they gave the impression of spiritual life. They were white and shiny with their religious fakery. But on the inside they were spiritually dead. Slap the paint on. Jesus said they were graves that had been painted over to give the

¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto*, p.73-74.

appearance of beauty and spiritual life but were dirty and rotten and dead on the inside.

- Jesus' response to the spiritual forgeries around him? He told them, you must be born again. You can't fake or act your way into the Kingdom. You can't obey Jesus' teachings by the power of your own volition. Jesus said the only way into his kingdom is if your spirit on the inside of you comes alive to him. You must be born again. *I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* "In the natural realm there can be no life without physical birth; likewise, in the spiritual realm there can be no spiritual life without a supernatural rebirth."² In other words, Jesus said you are not a Christian unless you've experienced a second birth—a birth of your spirit.
- This act of God, his Spirit giving birth, life to a person's spirit is called regeneration. When Jesus talks about being born again or twice-born or when the Bible talks about experiencing a second birth, all of this is to describe God's work of regeneration.
- Again, if you were to break down the doctrine of salvation, what the Bible teaches about how God saves, it would look like this. [Slide #2] Election, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, preservation, glorification. First God chooses, *to the praise of his glorious grace*. Then God regenerates.
- So what is regeneration? [Slide #3]

Big Idea

- **Regeneration is the creative work of God by which he awakens new spiritual life within a person, bringing that person from spiritual death to saving faith**
- Regeneration is the instantaneous, unseen work of God by which he imparts new spiritual life.³ Regeneration is not a change in the attitude of the will, it's not a decision to start doing Christian things, it's not a change of moral character, "I'm going to make good choices now." Regeneration is not the start of a new spiritual direction—turning over a new spiritual leaf so to speak. Regeneration is God making something dead alive. It is an instantaneous, unseen change of a person's nature brought about by God the Holy Spirit. He is the cause of it. He is the creator. He brings new life. Regeneration is God taking our spirit within us that is dead to him and blowing the breath of his Spirit on it to bring it alive, animating it, making it alive to him.

² Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, p. 277.

³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 704.

- Regeneration is different than conversion, which we'll take a look at next week. Conversion is our part in salvation, the response of faith and repentance to the gospel call. Like election, there is another there is an in-house, in the family debate about how regeneration and conversion fit together. Some see regeneration as God's response to our decision to repent of our sins and place our faith in Christ. Some see God's regenerating work coming first. Personally, that's where I'm at. Personally, I think persons are not regenerated because they first believe and repent; rather, they believe and repent because they are first regenerated.⁴
- I think a good illustration of the relationship between the new birth and conversion is Lazarus from **John 11**. "Lazarus was made alive by the power of God; in this event his soul was passive. But Lazarus came forth from the tomb; in this his soul was active."⁵
- That being said, a good case can be made from Scripture for both positions. So if you disagree with me, that's okay. Don't make this a bone of contention. It's kind of a chicken or egg kind of thing anyway; you can lose your mind trying to figure out what only God knows. How these two fit together is a mystery. And I'm okay with that. The goal here is worship. We ooh and aah at the miracle of birth. We are meant to ooh and aah and worship God because of the miracle of spiritual birth.
- Back to regeneration. The word regeneration is used only twice in New Testament.⁶ We most recently came across it in **Titus 3:5**. Even so, it's the summary word used for the range of passages describing God's creative work of new spiritual life.
- [Slide #4] You'll find it in **Ezekiel 36:26-27** when God says, *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. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees.* Sometimes, like in **2 Corinthians 5:17**, regeneration is spoken of as re-creation. *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.* Sometimes it's described as resurrection like in **Colossians 2:13**. *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.*

Transition

The image we are going to focus on this morning is that of new birth. Open your bibles to **John 3**.

⁴ Demarest, p. 287.

⁵ Demarest, p. 291.

⁶ Matthew 19:28 and Titus 3:5

- Let me set up **John 3** up for you. In chapter 2 the writer, John, tells us that while Jesus was in Jerusalem *at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs Jesus was doing and believed in his name.* That's **John 2:23**. Whole bunches believe in Jesus because of his miracles. They're like "Oh snap. Jesus is awesome." And they believe. Nicodemus was probably one of those who believed. So he seeks Jesus out.
- *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."*
- Nicodemus is like, "man Jesus those miracle things are awesome. You've got to be the Messiah, Jesus." And Jesus is like, "Nicodemus, you've got to be born again." **Verse 3**. *In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*
- It is so critical that you get what Jesus is saying with his response. Understanding Jesus here is the difference between genuine spiritual life and spiritual forgery. In essence Jesus is saying this. "Nicodemus, you think you see God in the signs I do, but unless you are born again, unless you have a birth that comes from God, you'll never be able to fully experience the importance of what I do through these signs. You'll continually misunderstand. You must be born again."
- And Nicodemus is like, born what? Born again? He's like, "Jesus, I'm an old man. How can I crawl back into my mother's womb and be born a second time?" **Verse 4**. *"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"*
- Jesus then clarified what he means in **verse 5**. He's not talking about a second physical birth. *Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*
- Listen. Without new birth, without Spirit giving birth to spirit, people who identify themselves as Christians are nothing more than spiritual forgeries. New birth makes you the real deal. Those truly in Jesus kingdom are the children born not of natural descent, nor of human

decision or a husband's will, but born of God.⁷ *You must be born again.* This is something personal for Nicodemus and for you. *You.* You must be born again. But more than that. *Must.* It's authoritative. This is absolutely the only way salvation can come about. It must happen through rebirth. Don't be surprised at this Jesus says in [verse 7](#). Don't be surprised that it must be this way. And it's passive. *Be born again.*

- We can't bring about the birth of our spirit anymore than any of us brought about our own physical birth. At 1:36 in the morning, July 19th, 1973 I came into this world. I had no say. It just happened. There I was. In the same way, we are passive in the process spiritual birth. God brings it about.
- How on earth could it be any other way? It's like Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. God's breath, his Spirit comes upon the valley of dry bones and the dry bones are revived; God's people come to life. It's the same with everyone born of the Spirit: they have their origin and destiny in the unseen God, not in human decision nor a husband's will, for they are born of God.⁸ [John 1:13](#). Jesus says Spirit gives birth to spirit. Regeneration is the instantaneous, unseen work of God by which he imparts new spiritual life.
- I love what [Ray Ortlund](#) says about the new birth. He says, "I need more than self-correction; I need a miracle deep within. I need God to call into existence within me a new aliveness to Him, new tastes, new desires, new openness and humility and fears and hopes, such as I have never experienced before and cannot conjure up out of my admirable upbringing and good intentions. I need newness of Genesis 1-magnitude. In fact, my eternal destiny hangs on something only God can do for me."⁹ I need new life, new birth, resurrection on the inside, the dead being made alive. And only God can do that.
- Imagine if I were to place before you here a dead frog. Rigor mortis has set in. Stiff, lifeless, stone cold dead and I say to the little guy, "jump froggy, jump. Animate yourself. Come to life. Revive." Now imagine your friend, your neighbor, your son, your daughter spiritually dead. Which is what we are, right? [Ephesians 2:1](#). *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.* And we say to them, "Come to life little spirit. Make yourself alive. Animate yourself. Resuscitate. Believe in Christ. Trust Jesus." Which is basically what we

⁷ John 1:13

⁸ Carson, p. 198.

⁹ Ray Ortlund, *You Must Be Born Again*, The Gospel Coalition Blog, Sept. 4th, 2010.
<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/rayortlund/2010/09/04/you-must-be-born-again/>

do when we evangelize, right? This is the foolishness of our life's work as Christians. We labor tirelessly to this end, we never stop calling out to the dead.

- Am I to believe that the spiritually dead make themselves come to life on their own? *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.* **Ephesians 2:4-5.**
- I think we just don't understand our true spiritual condition apart from God's intervening grace. The underlying assumption of the Bible's is that human nature is more than corrupt.¹⁰ Jesus himself says that we are morally evil, yes.¹¹ That we are spiritually sick and need to be made spiritually healthy.¹² He says we are in spiritual darkness, yes.¹³ Elsewhere the Bible says we are slaves to sin.¹⁴ We are under the sentence of death.¹⁵ That our wills are predisposed to sinful choices and actions.¹⁶ That our emotions are disordered.¹⁷ That our relationship with God broken and strained.¹⁸ In fact, we are blind, we cannot see God.¹⁹ We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. We need more than education. More than knowledge. More than going to church. More than reading the bible. We need to be made entirely new in order to know and love and serve God because before he animates our spirit, before Spirit gives birth to spirit, our spirits are stone cold dead to Him.
- Our only hope lies in a radical, supernatural, spiritual solution. We need new birth.²⁰ We come out of the womb physically alive but spiritually dead. Like that frog, like Nicodemus, by nature, we are unaware and unresponsive to spiritual stimuli.²¹ **1 Corinthians 2:14.** *The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.*
- God must do something. He must intervene. As someone once put it, "a conversion that is not rooted in regeneration is no true

¹⁰ Erickson, p. 942.

¹¹ Matt. 7:11; 12:34; John 3:19

¹² Matt. 9:12

¹³ Mat. 4:16; John 3:19; Eph. 5:8a

¹⁴ John 8:34; Romans 6:6, 16-20; 2 Tim. 2:26

¹⁵ Romans 5:12

¹⁶ John 6:44a; 2 Peter 2:19

¹⁷ Is. 57:21; Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 2:11

¹⁸ Gen. 3:8; James 4:4

¹⁹ Matthew 5:8; Romans 3:11a

²⁰ Demarest, p. 292.

²¹ Erickson, p. 942.

conversion."²² It's slapping white paint on an empty dead tomb of a body. It's spiritual forgery.

- That's regeneration. What I want to do now is give some practical applications.

Organizational Sentence

- **Four applications of God's regenerating work**

Transition

Application #1. [Slide #5]

1. **Don't trust a Christian pedigree or baptism or anything else for new spiritual life**
 - Just because your parents believe doesn't mean you have new life. You must be born again. You cannot ride into the Kingdom on the coattails of your parents. You must be born again. I like how Spurgeon put it. "There can be no such thing as sponsorship in receiving Christ or in faith. If you are an unbeliever, your father and your mother may be the most eminent saints, but this faith does not overlap and cover your unbelief. You must believe for yourself."²³
 - And just because you've been baptized, just because you take communion doesn't mean you have new life. Baptism is the symbol of new life but many people are baptized and are still spiritually dead on the inside. Then, how do you know if God has regenerated you? The way you know is if you are clinging to Christ and Christ alone for your salvation. If you believe God's foolish message of the cross of Christ as the means by which people are saved, then that's a really good sign you've been born again.

Transition

Application #2. [Slide #6]

2. **The effect of regeneration is a radically changed life**
 - Moving from death to life is a staggering change. When God births new spiritual life in a person it produces "a heartfelt trusting in Christ for salvation, an assurance of sins forgiven, a desire to read the Bible and pray, a delight in worship, a desire for Christian fellowship, a sincere desire to be obedient to God's word in Scripture, and a desire to tell others about Christ."²⁴ All these point to God's regenerating work having taken place.

²² Louis Berkhoff.

²³ Demarest, p. 290 quoting Spurgeon.

²⁴ Grudem, p. 701.

- Through God's regenerating work we become intellectually unblind; able to comprehend the things of God. If you are unable to apprehend divine truths it is a sign that you need to be born again. New birth enables a person to know, love, and affirm God's purposes. Volitionally, the will—now free from moral bondage—is able to pursue kingdom values. "Lesser loyalties give way to supreme loyalty to God and his purposes."²⁵
- Emotionally, new birth changes our affections and feelings change so that we don't have a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. "Twice-born persons are far more capable of manifesting love, empathy, compassion, etcetera, than once born persons."²⁶ Morally and ethically, we become freed from enslaved passions. Relationally, new birth enables genuine fellowship. And most important new birth allows a person to come to know God and enjoy him. If over a longer period of time, you aren't feeling and desiring these things you may not be born again.
- You might be able to fake it for a time. But, as one man put it, "genuine love for God and his people, heartfelt obedience to his commands, and the Christlike character traits that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit, demonstrated consistently over a period of time in a person's life cannot be produced by Satan or by the natural man or woman working in his or her own strength. These can only come about by the Spirit of God working within and giving us new life."²⁷ These are the necessary results in the lives of those who are born again.

Transition

Application #3. [Slide #7]

3. Regeneration means protection from Satan

- Listen to what **1 John 5:18** says. *We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.* Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrase puts it like this. "The God-begotten are also the God-protected." What a wonderfully encouraging truth. Like new parents who fiercely protect their offspring God protects his own. If he has birthed new life in you through Christ he will guard and keep your soul safe.

Transition

Application #4. [Slide #8]

²⁵ Demarest, p. 298.

²⁶ Demarest, p. 298.

²⁷ Grudem, p. 706.

4. Regeneration is meant to elicit praise

- Sound familiar from two weeks ago? **1 Peter 1:3**. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*
- "What should this doctrine of regeneration do for us, then? It should thrill our souls with a new sense of worship as we observe the sheer miracle that God has performed in us in this regenerating grace. It should enlarge our understanding of what it means to be redeemed. It should drive us to God in a new way for those who are yet without eternal life, recognizing that it is He and He alone who can bring this life to men and women. It should bow us down before Him in wonder that the God of all the ages, Creator of the universe, should apply such mighty works of power to the souls of men and women, in order to raise us into new life, and to conform us to the beautiful image of His son."²⁸
- And if you should ask, but why? "Why am I a Christian? Because God decided to set his love on me. But why me? Because he decided to love me."²⁹ But why? Because he is rich in mercy. Do I still have to believe? Absolutely yes. *To all who received Him, to those who believed on His name, He gave the right to become children of God, John 1:12.*
- But why have you believed when others did not? Why did you come to faith when you did, and not before or after? Your faith is a reflection of regeneration. God opened your eyes to see the glory of Christ. The Holy Spirit hovered over the dark chaos of your life and made you a new creation in Christ. Don't you see that God has done something amazing in your soul, giving you new life from above? God has given you a new heart. He has put His Spirit in you. He has given you new birth into living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So rejoice. **Regeneration is meant to elicit praise.**

Conclusion

- [Slide #12] Let me leave you with this final thought this morning. **John Milton** in his monumental poem *Paradise Lost* has this fabulous insight when he has Satan declare himself to be "self-begot, self-raised."³⁰ It is the doctrine of regeneration that helps free us from this delusion. We owe everything to God.

²⁸ Eric Alexander, *Our Great God and Saviour*, The Banner of Truth Trust.

²⁹ Grudem, p. 686-7.

³⁰ Leonard Sweet, *Jesus Manifesto*, p. 99 quoting John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2003), 123 (book 5, line 869).

- And so I say to you again, if you are still wondering whether or not you are on the inside of the kingdom looking out or on the outside looking in. End your doubts once and for all. Choose Christ now. Receive him now. Open your heart to him. Say yes to him. He is calling. He is knocking. He is waiting. He is longing to give you new birth from above.