



*John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

## **Week 22- You Must Be Born Again**

It is apparent from Scripture that there is a general calling to salvation, an invitation extended to all persons.

*Matthew 11: 28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

*Matthew 22: 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.*

In these verses He was referring to God's universal invitation. But note the distinction here between calling and choosing.

The circumstances of calling and choosing can vary widely. We see Jesus issuing special invitations to those who became the inner circle of disciples (Matt. 4: 18– 22; Mark 1: 16– 20; John 1: 35– 51).

He singled out Zacchaeus for particular attention (Luke 19: 1– 10).

In these cases, Jesus no doubt presented his claims in a direct and personal fashion which carried a special persuasiveness not felt by the surrounding crowd. We see another dramatic approach by God in the conversion of Saul (Acts 9: 1– 19).

Sometimes his calling takes a quieter form, as in the case of Lydia:

*Acts 16: 14 One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*

Salvation is in large measure the Holy Spirit's work of illumination, enabling the recipient to understand the true meaning of the gospel. This working of the Spirit is necessary because the depravity which is characteristic of all humans prevents them from grasping God's revealed truth.

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 2: 6– 16, George Ladd remarks that the first work of the Spirit is to enable men to understand the divine work of redemption. . . . This [the cross] was an event whose meaning was folly to Greeks and an offense to Jews. But to those enlightened by the Spirit, it is the wisdom of God.

In other words, Paul recognizes a hidden meaning in the historical event of the death of Christ ("God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," II Cor. 5: 19) that is not evident to the human eye but which can be accepted only by a supernatural illumination. . . .

Only by the illumination of the Spirit can men understand the meaning of the cross.

Only by the Spirit can men therefore confess that Jesus who was executed is also the Lord (1 Cor. 12: 3).

## **Conversion**

The Christian life, by its very nature and definition, represents something quite different from the way in which we previously lived.

In contrast to being dead in sins and trespasses, it is new life.

While it is of lifelong and even eternal duration, it has a finite point of beginning. "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step," said the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu. And so it is with the Christian life.

The first step of the Christian life is called conversion.

It is the act of turning from one's sin in repentance and turning to Christ in faith.

The image of turning from sin is found in both the Old and New Testaments.

*Ezekiel 18: 30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live."*

*Ephesians 5: 14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."*

*Acts 3: 19 Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out,*

While contemporary evangelists frequently plead, "Be converted," it is noteworthy that in the passages we have cited, the command is in the active. What is actually said is, "Convert!"

Conversion is a single entity which has two distinguishable but inseparable aspects: repentance and faith.

Repentance is the unbeliever's turning away from sin, and faith is his or her turning toward Christ.

They are, respectively, the negative and positive aspect of the same occurrence.

**In a sense, each is incomplete without the other, and each is motivated by the other. As we become aware of sin and turn from it, we see the necessity of turning to Christ for the provision of his righteousness. Conversely, believing in Christ makes us aware of our sin and thus leads to repentance.**

Scripture gives no specifications concerning the amount of time conversion involves.

On some occasions (Pentecost) it appears to have been an instant decision, with the change taking place virtually in a moment's time. On the other hand, for some people conversion was something more of a process (Nicodemus; see John 19: 39).

Similarly, the emotional accompaniments of conversion can vary greatly. Lydia's turning to Christ seems to have been very simple and calm in nature (Acts 16: 14). On the other hand, just a few verses later we read of the Philippian jailer, who, still trembling with fear upon hearing that none of the prisoners had escaped after the earthquake, cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" (v. 30).

The conversion experiences of these two people were very different, but the end result was the same. Sometimes the church has forgotten that there is variety in God's ways of working.

On the American frontier a certain type of preaching became stereotypical. Life was uncertain and often difficult, and the circuit-riding evangelist came only on infrequent occasions. The general pattern of preaching included a strong emphasis upon the awfulness of sin, a vivid presentation of the death of Christ and its benefits, and then an emotional appeal to accept Christ. The hearers were pressed to make an immediate decision.

And so conversion came to be thought of as a crisis decision. Although God frequently does work with individuals in this way, differences in personality type, background, and immediate circumstances may result in a very different type of conversion.

It is important not to insist that the incidentals or external factors of conversion be identical for everyone. It is important also to draw a distinction between conversion and conversions. There is just one major point in life when the individual turns toward Christ in response to the offer of salvation. There may be other points when believers must abandon a particular practice or belief lest they revert to a life of sin.

These events, however, are secondary, reaffirmations of the one major step that has been taken. We might say that there may be many conversions in the Christian's life, but only one Conversion.

## Repentance

The negative aspect of conversion is the abandonment or repudiation of sin. This is what we mean by repentance. It is based upon a feeling of godly sorrow for the evil we have done. As we examine repentance and faith, it should be remembered that they cannot really be separated from one another.

We will deal with repentance first because where one has been logically precedes where one is going.

There are two Hebrew terms which express the idea of repentance.

One is *nācham*, signifying "to pant, sigh, or groan." It came to mean "to lament or to grieve." When used in reference to an emotion aroused by consideration of one's own character and deeds, it means "to rue" or "to repent."

Interestingly, when *nācham* occurs in the sense of "repent," the subject of the verb is usually God.

A prime example is:

*Genesis 6: 6 And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*

The type of genuine repentance that humans are to display is more commonly designated by the word *shûv*. It is used extensively in the prophets' calls to Israel to return to the Lord. It stresses the importance of a conscious moral separation, the necessity of forsaking sin and entering into fellowship with God.

In the New Testament there are also two major terms for repentance.

The word *metamelomai* means "to have a feeling of care, concern, or regret." It stresses the emotional aspect of repentance, a feeling of regret or remorse for having done wrong. Jesus used the word in his parable of the two sons. When the first son was asked by his father to go and work in the vineyard, "he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went" (Matt. 21: 29). The second son said he would go, but did not. Jesus likened the chief priests and Pharisees (whom he was addressing) to the second son and repentant sinners to the first son. The word *metamelomai* is also used of Judas's remorse over his betrayal of Jesus (Matt. 27: 3).

It appears that *metamelomai* can designate simply regret and remorse over one's actions, as in the case of Judas. Or it can represent true repentance, which involves an actual alteration of behavior as in the case of the first son.

**It is instructive to contrast the actions of Judas and Peter in response to their sins. Peter returned to Jesus and was restored to fellowship. In the case of Judas, awareness of sin led only to despair and self-destruction.**

The other major New Testament term for repentance is *metanoēō*, which literally means "to think differently about something or to have a change of mind." It was a key term in the preaching of the early church.

*Acts 2: 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

As we examine this matter of repentance, we cannot avoid being impressed with its importance as a prerequisite for salvation. The large number of verses and the variety of contexts in which repentance is stressed make clear that it is **not optional** but indispensable.

That people in many different cultural settings were urged to repent shows that it is not a message meant only for a few specific local situations.

Rather, repentance is an essential part of the Christian gospel. It was prominent in the preaching of John the Baptist and of Jesus (Matt. 3: 2; 4: 17). And Paul declared in his message to the philosophers on Mars' Hill: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17: 30). This last statement is especially significant, for it is universal: "all men everywhere." There can be no doubt, then, that repentance is an ineradicable part of the gospel message.

It is important for us to understand the nature of true repentance.

Repentance is godly sorrow for one's sin together with a resolution to turn from it.

There are other forms of regret over one's wrongdoing which are based upon different motivations. One form of regret may be motivated by little more than selfishness.

If we have sinned and the consequences are unpleasant, we may well regret what we have done. But that is not true repentance. That is mere penitence.

Real repentance is sorrow for one's sin because of the wrong done to God and the hurt inflicted upon him. This sorrow is accompanied by a genuine desire to abandon that sin. The Bible's repeated emphasis upon the necessity of repentance is an incontrovertible argument against what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" (or "easy believism").

**It is not enough simply to believe in Jesus and accept the offer of grace;  
there must be a real alteration of the inner person.**

If belief in God's grace were all that is necessary, who would not wish to become a Christian?

*Luke 9: 23 And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

If there is no conscious repentance, there is no real awareness of having been saved from the power of sin. There may be a corresponding lack of depth and commitment.

Any attempt to increase the number of disciples by making discipleship as easy as possible ends up diluting the quality of discipleship instead.

## **Faith**

As repentance is the negative aspect of conversion, turning from one's sin, so faith is the positive aspect, laying hold upon the promises and the work of Christ.

Faith is at the very heart of the gospel, for it is the vehicle by which we are enabled to receive the grace of God. Once again it is important to look first at the biblical terminology.

Old Testament Hebrew conveys the idea of faith primarily with verb forms. Perhaps that is because the Hebrews regarded faith as something that one does rather than as something one has. It is an activity rather than a possession.

**Specifically, the Hebrew idea of faith is a confident resting or leaning upon someone or something, usually God or his word of promise.**

When we turn to the New Testament, there is one primary word which represents the idea of faith. It is the verb *pisteuō* together with its cognate noun *pistis*.

The verb has two basic meanings. First, it means "to believe what someone says, to accept a statement (particularly of a religious nature) as true."

*1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

A dramatic instance of the verb is Jesus' statement to the centurion, "Go; be it done for you as you have believed" (Matt. 8: 13).

Greatly impressed, Jesus rewarded the centurion's belief that his servant could be healed.

These and numerous other instances (e.g., Matt. 9: 28; Mark 5: 36) establish that faith involves believing that something is true. Indeed, the author of Hebrews declares that faith in the sense of acknowledging certain truths is indispensable to salvation: "And without faith it is impossible to please him.

*Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

**At least equally important are the instances in which *pisteuō* and *pistis* signify “personal trust as distinct from mere credence or belief.”**

*John 1: 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, (see also 2: 23; 3: 18; and 1 John 5: 13).*

This construction had special significance to the Hebrews, who regarded one’s name as virtually equivalent to the individual. Thus, to believe on or in the name of Jesus was to place one’s personal trust in him.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, we conclude that the type of faith necessary for salvation involves both believing that and believing in, or assenting to facts and trusting in a person. It is vital to keep these two together.

The God in whom we are to trust reveals himself, at least in part, through communicating information about himself to which we are to assent.

Sometimes faith is pictured as being antithetical to reason and unconfirmable.

It is true that faith is not something established on an antecedent basis by indisputable evidence. But it is also the case that faith, once engaged in, enables us to reason and to recognize various evidences supporting it. This means that faith is a form of knowledge; it works in concert with, not against, reason.

Jesus’ response to the two disciples whom John the Baptist sent to ask, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Luke 7: 19). Jesus responded by telling them to report to John the miracles they had seen and the message they had heard. Jesus in effect said to John, “Here is the evidence you need in order to be able to believe.”

We should note that although we have depicted conversion as a human response to divine initiative, even repentance and faith are gifts from God.

Jesus made very clear that conviction, which is presupposed by repentance, is the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16: 8– 11).

Jesus also said, “No one can come to me [exercise faith] unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6: 44).

Thus, both repentance and faith are gracious works of God in the life of the believer.

## Regeneration

Conversion refers to our response to God's offer of salvation and approach to humankind.

Regeneration is the other side of conversion. It is God's doing. It is God's transformation of individual believers, his giving a new spiritual vitality and direction to their lives when they accept Christ.

Underlying the doctrine of regeneration is an assumption regarding human nature. Human nature is in need of transformation.

### **The human being is spiritually dead and therefore needs new birth or spiritual birth.**

Not only are unbelievers unable to perceive spiritual truths; they are incapable of doing anything to alter their condition of blindness and their natural tendency toward sin. When one reads the description of the sinful human in Romans 3: 9– 20,

**... it is apparent that some radical change or metamorphosis is needed, rather than a mere modification or adjustment in the person.**

## The Biblical Descriptions

The biblical descriptions of the new birth are numerous, vivid, and varied. Even in the Old Testament, we find a striking reference to God's renewing work.

*Ezekiel 11: 19 And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.*

In the New Testament, the term which most literally conveys the idea of regeneration is palingenesis ("rebirth"). It appears just twice in the New Testament.

One of these instances is Matthew 19: 28, where it refers to the "new world" which will be part of the consummation of history.

The other is:

*Titus 3: 5 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,*

Here we have the biblical idea of rebirth. The best-known and most extensive exposition of the concept of the new birth is found in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3.

*John 3:3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

At a later point in the discussion he made the comment, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew’ ” (v. 7). In the same conversation, Jesus spoke of being “born of the Spirit.”

He had in mind a supernatural work transforming the life of the individual.

This work, which is indispensable if one is to enter the kingdom of God, is not something that can be achieved by human effort or planning.

It is also spoken of as being “born of God” or “born through the word of God” (John 1: 12– 13; James 1: 18; 1 Peter 1: 3, 23; 1 John 2: 29; 5: 1, 4).

Whoever undergoes this experience is a new creation (2 Cor. 5: 17).

Paul speaks of the renewing in the Holy Spirit (Titus 3: 5), of being made alive (Eph. 2: 1, 5), and of resurrection from the dead (Eph. 2: 6).

The same idea is implicit in Jesus’ statements that he had come to give life (John 6: 63; 10: 10, 28).

## **The Meaning of Regeneration**

While it is fairly easy to list instances where the idea of new birth occurs, it is not so easy to ascertain its meaning. We ought not to be surprised that the new birth is difficult to understand, however.

Jesus indicated to Nicodemus, who was having great difficulty grasping what Jesus was talking about, that the concept is difficult. It is like the wind:

*John 3: 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.”*

Not only is the new birth not perceived by the senses, but the concept itself encounters natural resistance.

Despite the problems in understanding the concept, several assertions can be made about regeneration.

First, it involves something new, a whole reversal of the person’s natural tendencies. It is not merely an amplification of present traits.

**For one side of regeneration involves putting to death or crucifying existent qualities.**

Contrasting the life in the Spirit with that in the flesh, Paul says:

*Galatians 5:24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.*

Other references to the death of the individual or of certain aspects of the individual include Romans 6: 1– 11 and Galatians 2: 20; 6: 14.

Regeneration is God's transformation of individual believers— he reverses their natural tendencies, gives a new spiritual vitality to their lives, and thus restores them to what they were originally intended to be.

As a putting to death of the flesh, the new birth involves a counteracting of the effects of sin.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in Paul's statement in Ephesians 2: 1– 10.

The deadness that requires a transformation is a result of the sin in which we live, being led by the prince of the power of the air.

Although regeneration involves something totally new to us, it does not result in anything foreign to human nature. Rather, the new birth is the restoration of human nature to what it originally was intended to be and what it in fact was before sin entered the human race at the time of the fall.

It is simultaneously the beginning of a new life and a return of the old life and activity. Further, it appears that the new birth is itself instantaneous.

**There is nothing in the descriptions of the new birth to suggest that it is a process rather than a single action.**

It is nowhere characterized as incomplete.

Scripture speaks of believers as "born again" or "having been born again" rather than as "being born again" (John 1: 12– 13; 2 Cor. 5: 17; Eph. 2: 1, 5– 6; James 1: 18; 1 Peter 1: 3, 23; 1 John 2: 29; 5: 1, 4).

While it may not be possible to determine the precise time of the new birth, and there may be a whole series of antecedents, it appears that the new birth itself is completed in an instant.

Although regeneration is instantaneously complete, it is not an end in itself.

As a change of spiritual impulses, regeneration is the beginning of a process of growth which continues throughout one's lifetime.

This process of spiritual maturation is sanctification.

Having noted that his readers were formerly dead but are now alive, Paul adds:

*Ephesians 2: 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

He speaks in Philippians 1: 6 of continuing and completing what has been begun.

**New birth is a supernatural occurrence.  
It is not something which can be accomplished by human effort.**

Jesus made this clear:

*John 3: 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

It is also important to bear in mind that regeneration is especially the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Although salvation was planned and originated by the Father and actually accomplished by the Son, it is the Holy Spirit who applies it to the life of the believer, thus bringing to fulfilment the divine intention for humans.**

The doctrine of regeneration places the Christian faith in an unusual position.

On the one hand, Christians reject the current secular belief in the goodness of the human and the optimistic expectations arising therefrom.

The very insistence upon regeneration is a declaration that without external help and complete transformation there is no possibility that genuine good on a large scale will emerge from humankind.

On the other hand, despite the pessimistic assessment of the natural powers of the human, Christianity is very optimistic: with supernatural aid humans can be transformed and restored to their original goodness.

It was in regard to God's ability to change human hearts, enabling us to enter his kingdom, that Jesus said, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19: 26).

## **Implications of Conversion, and Regeneration**

1. Human nature cannot be altered by social reforms or education. It must be transformed by a supernatural work of the Triune God.
2. No one can predict or control who will experience new birth. It is ultimately God's doing.
3. The beginning of the Christian life requires a recognition of one's own sinfulness and a determination to abandon the self-centered way of life.
4. Saving faith requires correct belief regarding the nature of God and what he has done. Correct belief is insufficient, however. There must also be active commitment of oneself to God.
5. The new birth is not felt when it occurs. It will, rather, establish its presence by producing a new sensitivity to spiritual things, a new direction of life, and an increasing ability to obey God.

## **Things to Mull**

1. Explain how all three members of the “Godhead” work salvation. Outline each one’s part and how They accomplish / ed their part. (Use as much scripture as possible)
2. Is humanity basically good or bad? Explain why we need conversion.
3. Why is it so important to differentiate between “be converted” and the command to “convert”? Explain why we are to “convert”?
4. Describe how we are to “repent”, how is this different from what people many times will do?
5. Explain how Peter’s repentance was different than Judas’ repentance.
6. Who or what are we supposed to have faith in? How do we put our faith in someone or something?
7. In “regeneration” what is changing? How long does regeneration take?
8. Does a person have to understand and acknowledge that they are “Born Again” to be saved?

## **Bibliography**

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