

# The First Work in the Order of Salvation - Regeneration: A Radical Change

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We, the children of God have all undergone a radical change. We have been regenerated. And to be regenerated is to be born again, born from above; it is to be resurrected from the dead and to be changed into a new creature. Could any change be more radical than this? Only God, the omnipotent and sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, could perform such a wonderful work. We did not help Him or cooperate with Him in any way. He did it alone. The glory for it belongs entirely to Him.

To be regenerated is to be born again. Until this happens we cannot even see the kingdom of heaven. And if we cannot see the kingdom, we cannot believe the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 24:14). Therefore, this work of regeneration must be first in the order of salvation.

To be born again is to be born "from above." This is literally what we read in John 3:3. And to be born from above is to be born of God. When God regenerates us, we become His children. Now, as a child of God, we are free from the bondage of sin and are unable to live in sin any longer. You see this in your own life, do you not? Are you not grievously bothered by your sin? Well, sorrow for sin is the first manifestation that you have been born of God (I John 3:9). The devil likes to point to your sinful flesh and say, "You cannot fight against this flesh of yours; why not just give in to it?" When this happens, you must remember that you are a regenerate child of God, born from above, and are no longer in bondage to sin.

Not only is regeneration a rebirth, it is also a resurrection from the dead. By nature we are dead in trespasses and sins. When God resurrects us, He infuses new spiritual qualities into us (Canons III & IV/11). To infuse means to pour in. Before you were regenerated, you were like a decaying corpse in a casket. When God regenerated you He reversed that decaying process, poured His Spirit into you, and you became alive.

We see a beautiful picture of this in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When Christ stood outside the open tomb and cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth," He was calling this new life into existence. And accompanying His Word was the quickening Spirit, which caused Lazarus to come to life.

Likewise, there was a time in your life when you were spiritually dead. Then our Lord came to you and called, "Come forth." This Word of God, which is always effective, penetrated deep down to the center of your being and translated you from death unto life.

What an amazing, radical change!

In addition to being a rebirth and a resurrection from the dead, regeneration is also a recreation. Someone who is in Christ is said to be a "new creature" (11 Cor 5:17, Canons III & IV/12) This new creation is not a creation out of nothing, but rather a renewing of what is already there. We read of this in Titus 3:5.

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.

Although this is a radical change, it is not a change of essence. When you were regenerated, you did not change from a man to an angel, or anything like that. You did not receive a new soul in the essential sense of the word. Rather your soul was renewed. You died about six thousand years ago, when you were in the loins of Adam. But now your soul has been renewed, your spirit is alive again, and you once more bear the image of God.

What an astonishing, radical change!

Most people today refuse to believe that such a radical change has taken place in anyone's life. These are people who deny that man by nature is spiritually dead, totally depraved, incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil. Some of them say that man by nature is perfectly well; others say that he is only sick. And some may even speak of man's need for regeneration. But to them a regenerated man is one who has merely made a small change in his thoughts or his actions as a result of some emotional preaching or someone's amazing testimony. None of them believe that such a radical change has happened in anyone's life.

But you know that such a change has happened in your life. For God's Spirit witnesses with your spirit that you have become a regenerated child of God.

Regeneration is also referred to as a washing. We read of this also in Titus 3:5. Although physical washing does not translate us from death unto life, spiritual washing does. This is because we used to be spiritually covered, not with dirt, but with sin - a deadly poison which instantly killed us; we have been spiritually washed, not with water, but with the blood of Christ which has quickening power.

This radical change takes place in the heart of the elect sinner and is analogous to a heart transplant. God Himself makes this analogy in Ezekiel 36:26: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh."

The heart is the center of your existence from a spiritual viewpoint. When God speaks of your spirit, he is speaking of your soul, particularly from the viewpoint of your soul's relationship to God. The unregenerate are spiritually dead and do not have a covenant relationship with God. Their mind and will are only concerned with the things of this earth. But we who are regenerated have a living spirit and are joined with God through Christ in a covenant relationship. This is why you find within yourself the desire to do the will of God and to think on things above.

There has been some debate in Reformed circles as to how regeneration takes place in the life of the elect sinner. The question has been whether God works regeneration through the means of the preaching of the gospel, or not. Those who say that regeneration does take place through the preaching are said to believe in "mediate regeneration." Those who say that it does not are said to believe in "immediate regeneration."

To answer this question, we must recognize that regeneration can be viewed in a broader and in a narrower sense. In the narrower sense, regeneration is viewed as the initial act of God whereby He goes into the very depth of a sinner's inner existence and translates him from death unto life. This is sometimes called the planting of the seed of regeneration. For most of God's people, it takes place while they are still in their infancy, or even before they are born. But it can take place at any time. Contrary to the claims of the Arminians, an individual cannot know precisely when this change has taken place in his or her life. For it is an immediate work of God. It takes place not by means of the preaching of the gospel, but solely through what I Peter 1:23 calls "the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever." This cannot be the preaching of the gospel, for there will be no preaching of the gospel in eternity. This description is only true of Christ. Christ is the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever. It is through Christ alone, not through Christ and through the preaching, that a person is regenerated in this narrower sense.

In the broader sense, regeneration includes the sprouting of this seed into the entire conscious life of the child of God. This seed sprouts forth also through Christ. But the preaching of the gospel stands in close connection with regeneration viewed in this broader sense. For

without the preaching of the gospel no one can come to conscious faith. So, although regeneration is immediate when viewed in the narrower sense, there is a broader sense in which it can be viewed as being mediate.

But whether we speak of regeneration in the broader or in the narrower sense, we must confess that it is entirely a work of God's sovereign grace. And He does this work with a specific goal in mind. God does not desire simply to bring us back to the state and condition we were in before the Fall. God desires to exalt us far above that, and to make us share in His own glorious life. We, along with Adam, needed to fall so that we could be regenerated. For only someone who has been regenerated and ingrafted into Christ can partake of the heavenly life that can be found only in Him.

And we who have become regenerated can be sure that we will never lose this new life. For regeneration is rooted in election. We have been regenerated solely because God chose to regenerate us. We cannot know why it pleased God to choose us, but we can know and we do know that He will never change His mind. For the almighty, sovereign, and loving God is also unchangeable. Oh, what a comfort it is to know that our whole, regenerated life rests entirely in Him!

All praise be to God for this wonderful work of regeneration! What a radical change God has wrought in our hearts! It is miraculous and incomprehensible, and yet it is true. Our Lord Jesus Christ is come, and He is come with the express purpose that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly!

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