

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 4: EFFECTUAL CALLING AND REGENERATION

The Spirit's Sovereign Work of New Birth

Lesson 11

Regeneration

The New Birth

Made Alive by the Sovereign Act of the Spirit

“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”

Key Texts: John 3:1–8; 1:12–13; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; Titus 3:5; Ezekiel 36:25–27; James 1:18; 1 John 5:1

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

John 3:6–8, NASB 1995

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Introduction

There is a moment in the history of every soul that has ever been genuinely saved that is, at once, the most decisive and the most invisible event of the believer's entire existence. It precedes the first tear of repentance. It precedes the first exercise of conscious faith. It precedes the first prayer offered in the name of Christ, the first opening of Scripture with the eyes of understanding, the first experience of the peace of God that passes understanding. It is the moment when the Holy Spirit acts alone, without human cooperation, without the sinner's assistance or awareness, to impart new spiritual life to a person who was dead — genuinely, totally, irreversibly dead, in trespasses and sins. It is the moment theologians call regeneration. And it is the moment on which everything else in the Christian life depends.

Regeneration may be defined as the instantaneous, supernatural, monergistic act of the Holy Spirit by which He imparts new spiritual life to the dead sinner, transforming the nature from its deep center outward, implanting new desires, new understanding, new affections, and a new will, and thereby enabling the repentance and faith through which the sinner consciously receives the salvation that has been accomplished by Christ and applied by the Spirit. The word itself comes from the Latin *regeneratio*, a re-generation, a generating again, a second birth, and it corresponds in theological precision to the biblical language of being “born again” or “born of the Spirit” (John 3:3, 5–8), of being “born of God” (John 1:12–13; 1 John 5:1), of being “made alive” (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13), and of being a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The doctrine of regeneration occupies a unique and decisive position in the *ordo salutis* because it is the precise point at which the sovereign gracious initiative of God most fully and most finally displaces every claim for human cooperation or contribution to the receiving of salvation. Effectual calling (Lesson 10) is the Spirit's external summoning; regeneration is the Spirit's internal transforming. Calling reaches the sinner from outside; regeneration occurs within, at the very center of the sinner's being. Calling is the summons; regeneration is the re-creation that makes it possible for the summoned sinner to respond. And the re-creation is entirely God's work, the sinner contributes nothing, assists in nothing, cooperates in nothing, just as Lazarus contributed nothing to his own resurrection from the tomb except the willingness of his clay to be animated by the life-giving word of the One who stood outside and called him forth.

This lesson will proceed through seven major sections: the definition and essential character of regeneration; the foundational text of John 3:1–8 and what Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the new birth; the monergistic character of regeneration and why the sinner's passivity is non-negotiable; the logical priority of regeneration over faith in the Reformed *ordo*; the instrument through which regeneration is ordinarily effected (the Word of God); the Ezekiel promise of the new heart and its fulfillment in the New Covenant; the evidences by which regeneration is recognized; and the permanence of the new birth. Each of these dimensions will be developed exegetically from the primary texts and theologically from the Reformed tradition's most careful formulations.

A pastoral note before we begin. The doctrine of regeneration is not primarily a doctrinal category for the intellectually ambitious; it is the most personally urgent truth that any human being can encounter. Every person who reads these words is either regenerate or unregenerate, either born again by the Spirit or still dead in trespasses and sins, and the difference between those two categories is the difference between eternal life and eternal death. The appropriate personal response to this lesson is not merely the satisfaction of intellectual clarity about a theological doctrine; it is the honest, Spirit-assisted self-examination of the soul that asks: have I been

born again? Are the evidences of the new birth present in my life? And if the answer to those questions remains unclear or uncertain, the appropriate response is not stoic theological reflection but earnest, persevering prayer that the Spirit who gives the new birth would do His sovereign, inexplicable, life-giving work.

I. Regeneration Defined

The Instantaneous, Supernatural, Monergistic New Birth

A. *Definition and Essential Characteristics*

Regeneration is the instantaneous, supernatural, monergistic act of the Holy Spirit by which He imparts new spiritual life to the dead sinner, radically transforming the inner person, mind, affections, will, and heart, from a state of spiritual death and bondage to a state of spiritual life and freedom, thereby enabling and producing the repentance and faith through which the sinner is personally united to Christ and receives the full benefits of His accomplished redemption. Each element of this definition carries theological weight and deserves careful attention.

“Instantaneous”: regeneration is not a gradual process but a definite event. Just as physical birth is a dateable event, one was born at a specific moment and was not in the process of being born across a period of time, so the new birth is an instantaneous act of the Spirit. The sinner is dead; then the Spirit acts; then the sinner is alive. There is no intermediate state of partial regeneration or progressive new birth. This does not mean that the fruits of regeneration, the new desires, new understanding, and new affections, are fully developed the moment regeneration occurs; it means that the event itself, the imparting of new life, is instantaneous. A baby may grow in the womb for nine months before birth, but the birth itself is an event, and what follows is life, not more birth. Similarly, the Spirit may be at work in the sinner’s circumstances for years before the new birth occurs, but the new birth itself is a definite event.

“Supernatural”: regeneration cannot be produced by any natural process, religious program, or human effort. It is not the result of exposure to the gospel, religious education, moral improvement, or the cultivation of spiritual disciplines, however valuable those things may be as preparatory or consequent to the new birth. It is an act of the third Person of the Trinity, who “blows where He wishes” (John 3:8) and whose regenerating work exceeds every human category of cause and effect. This does not mean that the Spirit operates entirely apart from means, the Word of God is the ordinary instrument through which regeneration is effected, but it means that the means are instruments in the Spirit’s sovereign hands, not tools that human beings can reliably operate to produce the new birth on demand.

“Monergistic”: regeneration is entirely the work of one agent, the Holy Spirit, with no cooperative contribution from the sinner. The unregenerate person does not assist in, cooperate with, or consent to her own regeneration; she is the passive recipient of a divine act that transforms her from the inside out. This is the most theologically controversial element of the definition, and it is the one that most sharply distinguishes the Reformed account from Arminian and Roman Catholic alternatives. The Reformed tradition grounds monergism in the biblical descriptions of the unregenerate’s condition (dead, blind, enslaved) and in the specific biblical language of the new birth as entirely God’s act. Just as Lazarus did not cooperate in his own resurrection from the tomb, the spiritually dead sinner contributes nothing to her own spiritual resurrection. The monergism of regeneration will be developed at greater length in Section III.

B. *Regeneration Distinguished from Related Concepts*

Regeneration must be carefully distinguished from several related concepts with which it is sometimes confused in popular Christian usage. First, regeneration is not the same as conversion. Conversion refers to the sinner's conscious, deliberate turning from sin to God in repentance and faith, the human response to the Spirit's work that follows regeneration and is produced by it. Regeneration precedes conversion in the logical order; conversion is the first fruit of the regenerated life. The confusion of the two leads either to the Arminian error of making regeneration follow and depend on conversion (the sinner converts; God then regenerates) or to the opposite error of treating regeneration as if it were simply the subjective experience of conversion (what actually happened to me when I decided to follow Christ).

Second, regeneration is not the same as baptism, in the sense of water baptism conferring the new birth by the act of administration. The Reformed tradition, following the Protestant Reformation's rejection of baptismal regeneration, insists that water baptism is the sign and seal of regeneration, the covenantal rite that marks and attests the new birth, not the instrument that produces it. The new birth is the Spirit's sovereign act, not the water's ritual efficacy. Titus 3:5 speaks of "the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit", a passage that may allude to baptism but that attributes the regenerating work to the Spirit rather than to the water. John 3:5 ("born of water and the Spirit") has been interpreted variously: as referring to water baptism, to physical birth, to the Word of God as the instrument of regeneration, or to the Old Testament background of Ezekiel 36:25–27 (cleansing water and new spirit). The most contextually satisfying interpretation connects "born of water" to the Ezekiel promise of cleansing and renewal, preparing the way for the emphasis on the Spirit's work in verses 6–8.

Third, regeneration is distinct from sanctification, though the two are inseparable in the experience of the genuinely regenerate. Sanctification is the progressive, ongoing, Spirit-empowered transformation of the believer toward conformity with Christ, a lifelong process that is never complete in this age. Regeneration is the instantaneous event that is the foundation and source of that process: the new nature implanted in regeneration is the nature from which sanctification's growth proceeds. The two are distinct in logical order and in character (instantaneous event vs. progressive process) but inseparable in experience: every genuinely regenerate person is also genuinely (if progressively) being sanctified. The absence of any sanctification in a professed Christian is, in the New Testament's account, not evidence of regeneration without sanctification; it is evidence that regeneration has not genuinely occurred.

II. The New Birth in John 3:1–8

Jesus and Nicodemus: The Most Famous Conversation About Regeneration

A. *The Context and the Conversation*

John 3:1–21 is the most extended and most theologically concentrated treatment of regeneration in the entire New Testament. The setting is remarkable: a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, a man of the highest religious standing, profound scriptural learning, and genuine theological curiosity, comes to Jesus by night and receives, in response to his opening compliment, the most shattering and most searching word that the Son of God could have addressed to a man in Nicodemus's position: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3, NASB 1995). The word is shattering because Nicodemus is precisely the person who would be most likely to assume that he already has entrance to the kingdom: a man of impeccable religious

credentials, thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, sincere piety, and evident spiritual interest. If Nicodemus needs to be born again, then no one is exempt.

The phrase “born again” (Greek: *gennēthē anōthen*) is susceptible of two translations: “born again” (temporally, a second birth) or “born from above” (spatially, a birth whose origin is in the divine realm). Both meanings are almost certainly intended by John, who consistently employs wordplays of this kind throughout the Gospel. The new birth is a birth that comes again, a second definitive origination of the person’s life, and it is a birth that comes from above, from the sovereign act of the Spirit who is from the divine realm and who cannot be controlled or predicted by any human agent. Nicodemus takes the temporal meaning alone (“How can a man be born when he is old?” v. 4) and thereby reveals the depth of his misunderstanding: he cannot conceive of a new birth that is not a repetition of the physical birth he has already experienced. Jesus’ response deepens the point rather than simplifying it.

Verse 5 introduces the “born of water and the Spirit” formulation: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (NASB 1995). The most contextually plausible interpretation of the “water” here draws on the background of Ezekiel 36:25–27, where God promises both the cleansing water that removes defilement and the new spirit that He will place within His people. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, a man who knows his Old Testament, that the kingdom of God requires the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise: the divine cleansing and the divine implantation of new spiritual life. In verse 10, Jesus reproves Nicodemus for not knowing this: “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” The new birth is not a novelty that Nicodemus could not have been expected to anticipate; it is the fulfillment of what Ezekiel had promised, and a teacher of Israel should have recognized it.

B. The Essential Teaching of John 3:6–8

Verses 6–8 provide the most theologically dense statement in the passage, and they deserve the most careful attention: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (NASB 1995). Three major theological affirmations emerge from these verses.

First, the total incapacity of the flesh to produce spiritual life: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” The unregenerate person, born only of the flesh, can produce only what the flesh is capable of producing: more flesh. No amount of religious effort, moral discipline, intellectual achievement, or sincere religious intention can elevate what is born of the flesh to the level of what is born of the Spirit. This is not a statement about the worthlessness of the human person; it is a statement about the categorical impossibility of the unregenerate person producing spiritual life from within her own fleshly resources. The category change from flesh to spirit requires an act that comes from outside the flesh entirely, from the Spirit who is not of the flesh and whose life cannot be produced by anything the flesh can do.

Second, the necessity of the new birth for entrance into the kingdom: “You must be born again.” The verb (*dei*, must) is the language of divine necessity. Jesus is not saying that it would be preferable or advantageous to be born again; He is saying that it is an absolute requirement, a non-negotiable condition, a divine must, without which entrance into the kingdom of God is simply impossible. The must is directed at Nicodemus in the second person singular: you, specifically, must be born again. The religious achievements that Nicodemus has

accumulated, his Pharisaic piety, his scriptural mastery, his membership in the Sanhedrin, his sincere spiritual interest, none of these constitutes or contributes to the new birth. The must stands over all of them, unembarrassed by their impressiveness, insisting that they cannot substitute for what only the Spirit can give.

Third, the sovereign unpredictability of the Spirit's regenerating work: "The wind blows where it wishes... so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." The Greek word for "wind" (pneuma) is the same word as "spirit," and the wordplay is intentional. The Spirit, like the wind, moves according to His own sovereign will, not randomly or capricious, but according to the purposes He has accepted in the covenant of redemption, unconstrained by human prediction, religious preparation, institutional control, or social expectation. Those who are born of the Spirit share this character of sovereign unmanageability: you cannot predict where the Spirit will blow next; you cannot guarantee that your religious program will produce new birth; you cannot control who enters the kingdom by controlling the processes of your religious institution. You can hear the wind; you cannot command it. You can use the means the Spirit has appointed; you cannot operate those means with the certainty of sovereign control. The new birth is always, ultimately, the Spirit's sovereign gift.

The conversation with Nicodemus reaches its theological climax in verse 8 but its pastoral climax later in the passage, in verse 16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (NASB 1995). The sequence is instructive: the radical necessity of the new birth (v. 3–8) is immediately followed by the declaration of the divine love that is the ground of that necessity's resolution (vv. 14–17). God does not leave the sinner confronted with an impossible requirement without providing the divine love that both grounds the requirement (His holiness demands new creation) and fulfills it (His love gave the Son through whom new creation is made possible by the Spirit). The new birth is both the most impossible thing the sinner needs and the most certain provision of the God who loved the world and gave His Son.

III. The Monergistic Character of Regeneration

The Sinner's Total Passivity in the New Birth

A. *The Biblical Grounds for Monergism*

The monergistic character of regeneration, the teaching that regeneration is entirely the work of God, with no cooperative contribution from the sinner, is the most exegetically secure and the most theologically contested element of the Reformed doctrine of the new birth. Its exegetical security rests on four converging lines of biblical testimony.

First, the biblical descriptions of the unregenerate's spiritual condition consistently present a state of incapacity so total that cooperation with regenerating grace is categorically impossible. Ephesians 2:1–5 describes the unregenerate as "dead in trespasses and sins", not weakened, not disadvantaged, not spiritually ailing, but dead. Dead people do not cooperate in their own resurrection; they are the passive recipients of the life that is given to them from outside themselves. The imagery of spiritual death is not metaphorical exaggeration; it is the apostolic assessment of the spiritual condition of every person who has not been born again. John 3:3–5 confirms the same incapacity from a different angle: "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" and "Unless one

is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter.” The “cannot” is absolute, a categorical impossibility, not a mere difficulty.

Second, the specific biblical language for the new birth consistently presents it as an act of sovereign divine initiative rather than a response to human initiative. John 1:13 states with the most explicit possible grammar that the new birth is “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” The three-fold negation, not of blood (natural generation), not of the will of the flesh (human biological impulse), not of the will of man (human volitional choice), exhausts the range of possible human contributions and excludes every one of them. The positive affirmation, “but of God”, attributes the new birth exclusively to the divine will and divine action. James 1:18 confirms this: “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth.” The new birth is the exercise of God’s will, not a response to the exercise of the human will. And 1 Peter 1:3 attributes the new birth to the “great mercy” of God, sovereign, undeserved, unmotivated by anything in the recipient.

Third, the New Testament’s use of resurrection language for regeneration establishes the same monergistic logic. Ephesians 2:5 says that God “made us alive together with Christ” when we were dead in trespasses, the analogy to Christ’s resurrection is explicit. Colossians 2:13 repeats the same point: “When you were dead in your transgressions... He made you alive together with Him.” The resurrection of Christ is the paradigmatic act of monergistic divine power: the dead body of the Son of God contributed nothing to its own resurrection; the Father raised Him by the sovereign power of the Spirit (Romans 8:11). The regeneration of the sinner follows the same pattern: the dead sinner contributes nothing to the spiritual resurrection; the Spirit imparts life by the sovereign exercise of the same resurrection power that raised Christ from the dead.

Fourth, the biblical descriptions of what the regeneration accomplishes, the removal of the heart of stone and the giving of a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26), the creation of a new heart and a new spirit, are descriptions of a divine surgery performed on the passive patient, not of a cooperative transformation in which the patient assists the surgeon. The surgeon operates; the patient undergoes the operation. The Spirit transforms; the sinner is transformed. The monergism of regeneration is built into the metaphors that Scripture itself uses to describe it.

B. Why Monergism Matters: The Theological Stakes

The monergism of regeneration is not merely a technical theological claim about the mechanics of the new birth; it is the indispensable structural element that establishes the genuinely sovereign character of grace in salvation. If regeneration were in any sense synergistic, if the sinner’s cooperation or consent were a condition of the new birth, then the decisive causal act in the reception of salvation would ultimately be the sinner’s own will, and the difference between the person who is regenerate and the person who is not would be a difference in the persons themselves rather than a difference in the sovereign grace of God. The one who contributed the decisive act of willing cooperation would have something to boast about, however small, however grace-assisted, that the other did not. But Ephesians 2:9 insists that the entire structure of salvation is designed to ensure that “no one may boast.” The monergism of regeneration is the guarantee that the structure achieves its anti-boasting purpose.

The pastoral stakes of this distinction are equally high. The person who believes that regeneration required some cooperative act of the will has, however subtly, something in herself to which she can trace her regeneration, some prior willingness, some spiritual openness, some responsive quality that made the difference. This “something” is precisely what the hymnody of heaven explicitly excludes: “Not I, but Christ” (Galatians 2:20); “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10, NASB 1995); “What do you have that you did not receive?”

(1 Corinthians 4:7, NASB 1995). The monergism of regeneration is the theological guarantee that the praise for the new birth belongs entirely to the Spirit who gave it, not partially to the sinner who received it.

The monergism of regeneration also has direct implications for how the church prays and proclaims. If the new birth is entirely the Spirit's sovereign gift, then the preacher who desires to see her congregation born again will pray with the urgency and the dependence of someone who knows that the outcome lies entirely outside her control and entirely within the Spirit's sovereign power. She will not preach as if the quality of her communication will determine who is born again; she will preach as the instrument of the Spirit, whose sovereign, life-giving work is what actually makes the dead alive. And she will pray with the earnestness of someone who knows that the only power sufficient for the task is the power that raised Christ from the dead, and that power is available, not through her own eloquence or persuasion, but through the sovereign pleasure of the Spirit who moves as He wills.

IV. The Logical Priority of Regeneration over Faith

Why the New Birth Precedes Believing in the Reformed Ordo

A. The Exegetical Case

The claim that regeneration logically precedes faith, that the Spirit must first impart spiritual life to the dead sinner before the sinner can exercise saving faith, is one of the most exegetically well-grounded and most practically important claims in the whole of the Reformed account of the *ordo salutis*. It is important to clarify, first, what the claim means: it means that in the logical order of the Spirit's saving work, regeneration is the presupposition of faith, not its consequence. It does not mean that there is a measurable temporal interval between regeneration and faith, as if a person could be regenerate for some period of time before believing. In most conversions, regeneration and the first exercise of faith are so tightly connected that they occur in what appears to be a single experiential moment. The logical priority is about the order of dependency, not the order of clock time: faith depends on regeneration, not regeneration on faith.

The exegetical case for this logical priority rests primarily on two categories of text. The first category is the texts that establish the spiritual incapacity of the unregenerate for saving faith, which have already been developed in earlier sections: Ephesians 2:1–5 (dead in trespasses and sins), John 6:44 (no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws), John 3:3 (unless one is born again he cannot even see the kingdom of God), Romans 8:7 (the mind set on the flesh cannot subject itself to God). If these texts are taken seriously, if the unregenerate person genuinely cannot respond to the gospel with saving faith, then some divine act must precede and enable that faith. That act is regeneration: the Spirit's impartation of new life, which gives the sinner the spiritual capacity to see, desire, and receive the Christ who is offered in the gospel.

The second category is the texts that specifically describe faith as the fruit or consequence of regeneration rather than its cause. First John 5:1 is perhaps the clearest: "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (NASB 1995). The Greek construction is telling: "is born" (*gegennētai*) is a perfect passive participle, indicating a completed past action with ongoing results. The one who believes (present tense, ongoing action) has been born of God (completed prior action). The grammar establishes that the being born of God is the completed prior condition of which the believing is the present, ongoing fruit. You believe because you have been born of God; not: you are born of God because you believe.

First John 4:7 provides a parallel: “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” Again, the love (present tense) is the fruit of the being born of God (perfect passive, completed prior action). First John 2:29 adds: “You know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” The pattern is consistent across the Johannine letters: the various evidences of the spiritual life, faith, love, righteous practice, are uniformly presented as the ongoing present fruits of the completed prior new birth. The new birth produces the evidences; the evidences are the signs and fruits of the new birth. This is the logical priority the Reformed tradition has consistently maintained: not faith producing regeneration, but regeneration producing faith.

B. The Pastoral Implications of Logical Priority

The logical priority of regeneration over faith has important pastoral implications that go beyond the abstract question of causal order. Most significantly, it establishes that the ground of the believer’s assurance is ultimately the new birth, the sovereign, Spirit-wrought impartation of new life, rather than the quality or consistency of her ongoing faith. The faith fluctuates; it is sometimes strong and sometimes weak, sometimes clear and sometimes clouded. The new birth does not fluctuate: it is a completed, past, irreversible divine act. The believer who grounds her assurance in the quality of her present faith will find assurance as variable as the faith; the believer who grounds her assurance in the new birth that produced the faith will find assurance as stable as the sovereign act of the Spirit that cannot be reversed.

The logical priority also provides the preacher with a framework for understanding and describing the experience of conversion to her congregation. Conversion, the conscious, deliberate exercise of repentance and faith, is not the beginning of the Spirit’s work in the sinner; it is the sinner’s first conscious awareness of a work that the Spirit may have been doing for some time, preparing the ground, attending the Word, moving in the circumstances of the person’s life in ways that were invisible but real. The moment of conscious conversion, the moment when the eyes of the heart are opened to see Christ as He truly is, is the moment when the new birth’s effects break through into conscious experience, not the moment when the new birth first occurs. The Spirit may have been working for months or years; the person may become aware of it at a specific and identifiable moment; but the work itself precedes the awareness. This is not a reason for the unconverted to delay seeking Christ; it is a reason for the converted to marvel that the Spirit found them before they knew they needed to be found.

V. The Instrument and the Ezekiel Promise

The Word of God and the New Covenant Fulfillment

A. The Word as the Instrument of Regeneration

While regeneration is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, a work that cannot be produced by any human effort or any natural process, the Spirit does not ordinarily regenerate in a vacuum of pure spiritual immediacy, apart from any external instrument. He regenerates through the Word of God, the gospel proclaimed, read, or otherwise received, using it as the instrument through which the divine, life-giving power of the Spirit is ordinarily applied to the soul of the elect sinner. This is the teaching of several convergent New Testament texts that establish the Word as the seed of the new birth.

First Peter 1:23 is the most explicit: “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God” (NASB 1995). The imagery of seed is illuminating: just as physical life requires the planting of a seed, spiritual life requires the planting of the Word of God in the heart of the sinner. The Word is the “seed” through which the Spirit communicates the life of the new birth, not because the Word has any independent regenerating power apart from the Spirit who uses it, but because the Spirit has appointed the Word as His ordinary vehicle. The Word that is planted is “imperishable”, the same adjective used for the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15, suggesting that the life it communicates shares the character of the life of the risen Christ.

James 1:18 provides the explicit Trinitarian account of the same reality: “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (NASB 1995). The “He” is God; the “bringing forth” is regeneration; the instrument is “the word of truth.” The sovereignty of the act (“in the exercise of His will”) and the instrument of the act (“by the word of truth”) are both named in the same sentence, establishing that the monergism of regeneration is entirely compatible with the instrumentality of the Word. The Spirit acts sovereignly; He acts through the Word; and the two affirmations are not in tension.

The relationship between the Word and the Spirit in regeneration is the same as the Word-Spirit nexus described in Lesson 9: the Spirit uses the Word but is not bound by it in the sense that the Word has independent regenerating power that operates apart from the Spirit’s sovereign use of it. On the one hand, the Word never regenerates apart from the Spirit’s accompanying, effectual work: the same Word heard by many produces regeneration in only those to whom the Spirit applies it with effectual power (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). On the other hand, the Spirit does not ordinarily regenerate apart from the Word: the Word is the seed, and the planting of the seed is the ordinary means by which the Spirit communicates new life. Preaching that is divorced from its theological significance, reduced to mere information transfer or emotional manipulation, has misunderstood both what the Word is (the Spirit’s seed) and what preaching is (the sowing of that seed in dependence on the Spirit’s sovereign power to give it life).

B. The Ezekiel Promise: New Covenant Regeneration Anticipated

No Old Testament text is more directly relevant to the doctrine of regeneration than Ezekiel 36:25–27, and it deserves extended attention because it establishes that the new birth is not a novelty introduced by the New Covenant but the fulfillment of a specific, named, divinely promised transformation that the prophetic tradition had been anticipating for centuries. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (NASB 1995).

The structural elements of the Ezekiel promise map directly onto the New Testament’s account of regeneration and the new birth. The sprinkling of clean water corresponds to the cleansing dimension of the new birth, the washing away of sin and defilement, which John 3:5’s “born of water” likely alludes to. The new heart corresponds to what Paul calls the “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17) and what John 3 calls the new birth: the radical inner transformation that produces entirely new desires, affections, and orientations. The removal of the heart of stone and the giving of a heart of flesh corresponds to the Westminster Confession’s account of what the effectual call accomplishes: “taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh” (WCF X.1). And the

indwelling of the Spirit (“I will put My Spirit within you”) corresponds precisely to what Lesson 9 established as the Spirit’s role as the bond of union.

The causal structure of the Ezekiel promise is also profoundly instructive for the doctrine of regeneration. The promise runs from divine initiative through divine transformation to consequent human obedience: God cleanses → God gives the new heart → God puts His Spirit within → Israel walks in His statutes and observes His ordinances. The obedience is the consequence of the regeneration, not its condition. God does not say: “If you will walk in my statutes, then I will give you a new heart.” He says: “I will give you a new heart... and cause you to walk in My statutes.” The divine initiative produces both the inner transformation (the new heart) and the outward obedience (walking in His statutes), with the latter flowing inevitably from the former. This is the Reformed doctrine of regeneration in its Old Testament form: the sovereign, free, gracious act of God that produces the new heart from which the new life flows.

Jesus’ rebuke of Nicodemus in John 3:10 (“Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”) makes the connection between the new birth and the Ezekiel promise explicit: Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, should have recognized in Jesus’ language about the new birth the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise that Ezekiel had articulated. The new birth is not a new idea; it is the Old Testament’s most comprehensive prophetic description of what the New Covenant would bring, and Jesus is announcing that the hour of its fulfillment has arrived. The Spirit who was promised to be put within is the same Spirit who is being promised to Nicodemus as the source of the new birth. The new heart promised to Israel is the same new heart that Nicodemus, and every subsequent hearer of the gospel, needs and can receive.

VI. The Evidences of Regeneration

How the New Birth Is Known by Its Fruits

A. *The Johannine Tests of the New Birth*

The New Testament, particularly the Johannine letters, provides a specific and remarkably consistent set of evidences by which the reality of the new birth can be identified in the life of the person who claims to have been born again. These evidences are not a checklist for earning or maintaining the new birth; they are the natural and necessary fruits that the new life implanted in regeneration invariably produces. Just as the life of a tree is known by its fruit, a living tree produces fruit; a dead tree does not, however long it may continue to stand, so the spiritual life of the new birth is known by the spiritual fruit it produces. The absence of these fruits is not evidence of regeneration accompanied by fruitlessness; it is evidence that regeneration has not genuinely occurred.

First John provides the most systematic treatment of the evidences of regeneration in the entire New Testament. Four primary tests are identifiable across the letter. The first is faith in Christ: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1, NASB 1995). The new birth invariably produces genuine faith in Christ, not merely intellectual assent to propositions about Jesus but the personal, whole-soul trust in Jesus as the Christ, the Lord, the Savior, and the only sufficient ground of the believing soul’s acceptance before God. Where the new birth is real, this faith is real; where this faith is absent, the new birth is absent.

The second test is love for the brethren: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14, NASB 1995). The love here is not a general

benevolence toward humanity or an emotional warmth toward agreeable people; it is the specific, distinguishing love for those who are in Christ, the love that crosses the natural boundaries of affinity and preference to embrace as family those whom God has adopted as His children. This love is a supernatural reality: it is not produced by natural affinity, shared experience, or compatible personality; it is produced by the new nature that the Spirit has implanted, which recognizes and loves the same Spirit in others. Where the new birth is real, this love is real, however imperfectly it may be expressed; where this love is entirely absent, the new birth is absent.

The third test is the practice of righteousness: “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him” (1 John 2:29, NASB 1995); “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9, NASB 1995). The strong language of verse 9 has been understood variously, but the most consistent interpretation in context is that the one born of God does not practice sin as a lifestyle, a settled pattern, a dominant and unregrieved orientation of the life. This is not a claim to sinless perfection, which 1 John 1:8–10 explicitly denies, but a claim about the direction and orientation of the regenerate life. The new birth implants a hatred of sin and a love of righteousness that produces a directional movement away from sin and toward God, however imperfect and inconsistent in any given season.

The fourth test is the overcoming of the world: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith” (1 John 5:4, NASB 1995). The “world” in Johannine theology is the organized system of values, relationships, and orientations that is structured around the rejection of God and the exaltation of the self. The new birth produces a fundamental reorientation of the person’s deepest values and loyalties, so that what the world prizes is no longer the governing attraction of the regenerate life and what God prizes is increasingly the governing love. This does not mean the regenerate person is immune to worldly temptation or always successfully overcomes it; it means that the victory over the world is the overall trajectory of the life that is born of God, through the instrument of the faith that the new birth has produced.

B. The Titus 3:5 Summary and the Diagnostic Function of the Evidences

Titus 3:5 provides the most compressed summary of regeneration in the Pauline corpus: “By the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (NASB 1995). The two phrases, “washing of regeneration” and “renewing by the Holy Spirit”, are not describing two separate events but two dimensions of the same sovereign act. The washing speaks to the cleansing dimension: the Spirit’s removal of the defilement of sin and the impurity of the old nature. The renewing speaks to the creative dimension: the implantation of the new nature, the formation of the new heart, the establishment of the new life. Together they summarize what Ezekiel promised (“I will sprinkle clean water on you... I will give you a new heart”) and what the New Testament testifies: the Spirit’s regenerating work is both a cleansing from the old and an enlivening with the new.

The diagnostic use of the evidences of regeneration is one of the most practically important applications of the doctrine in the pastoral life of the church. The pastor who understands the evidences can use them in at least two distinct ways. The first is for the assurance of the genuinely regenerate but anxious believer: directing her not to the quality of her past religious experience or to the sincerity of her original commitment, but to the present, observable, Spirit-produced fruits of the new life, the faith in Christ, the love for the brethren, the practice of righteousness, the overcoming of the world. If these are genuinely present, she has evidence that the new birth is real, and the assurance can be grounded in what the Spirit is producing rather than in what she is performing.

The second use is for the warning and invitation of those in whom the evidences are absent: those who claim the Christian name, participate in the Christian community, and know the Christian content but show none of the Christian fruit. For such persons, the pastoral task is not to assure them of a salvation whose evidences are absent but to press the claim of John 3:7, “You must be born again”, with all the urgency that a sovereign necessity demands. The religious activity, the correct doctrine, the church membership, the baptismal certificate, none of these are evidences of the new birth; only the fruit of the new birth is evidence of the new birth. And the person in whom that fruit is absent needs to hear, with compassion and directness, that the sovereign necessity of John 3:7 has not yet been met in their life, and that the same Spirit who regenerates sovereignly is also the Spirit who is willing and powerful to do so for any who earnestly seek Him through the means He has appointed.

VII. The Permanence of Regeneration

Once Born of God, Always a Child of God

A. The Irreversibility of the New Birth

The permanence of regeneration, the teaching that the new birth cannot be reversed or undone, is one of the most pastorally significant dimensions of the doctrine, and it is directly connected to the monergistic character of the new birth that was established in Section III. If regeneration is entirely the work of God, if the sinner contributes nothing to it and cannot produce it by any act of her own will, then the reversal of regeneration would equally require a divine act, and such a divine act would be inconsistent with the whole of the biblical testimony about the permanence of God’s saving purposes.

First John 3:9 states the permanence with characteristic Johannine directness: “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” The phrase “His seed abides in him” is the key: the seed of the new birth, the Spirit’s implanting of the new life through the Word of God, is a permanently indwelling reality. It does not come and go with the believer’s spiritual performance; it abides. The new nature that the Spirit has implanted does not die out when the believer falls into sin; it perseveres, producing in the believer the grief over sin, the return to God in repentance, and the renewed pursuit of holiness that are the marks of a living faith rather than a dead one.

John 1:12–13 establishes the same permanence from the perspective of the filial relationship that regeneration creates: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” To be born of God is to become a child of God; and the child of God does not cease to be a child of God by reason of inconsistent behavior or seasons of spiritual failure. Just as a human being born into a family remains a member of that family regardless of subsequent conduct, the biological relationship established at birth is not dissolved by behavior, so the spiritual relationship established at the new birth is not dissolved by the believer’s subsequent failures. The one who is born of God is, by that birth, a member of the divine family in a way that no subsequent failure can undo.

The permanence of regeneration is also established by the eschatological texts that connect the new birth to the ultimate glorification of the believer. First Peter 1:3 describes the new birth as producing “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and

will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (NASB 1995). The inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, characteristics that describe not the believer’s spiritual performance but the sovereign divine preservation of what belongs to those who are born again. Verse 5 adds the explicit promise that they are “protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” The permanence of the new birth is the permanence of the divine power that brought it about and that continues to guard its fruits.

B. Apparent Exceptions and the ‘Once Regenerate, Always Regenerate’ Principle

The claim that regeneration is permanent raises the obvious pastoral question: what about those who appear to have been genuinely born again but subsequently fall away from the faith, denying Christ, abandoning the community, and showing none of the evidences of the new life that once seemed real? First John 2:19 provides the apostolic answer: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us” (NASB 1995). The logic is impeccable: the departure proves the absence of genuine belonging. Those who finally and completely fall away do so not because the new birth was reversed but because the new birth never genuinely occurred. The appearance of regeneration was real, the religious experience may have been intense, the profession sincere-seeming, the participation in the Christian community genuine, but the new birth itself was not real.

This is a sobering claim, and it must be held with pastoral care rather than with the cold precision of a detective eliminating suspects. It does not mean that every season of doubt, every experience of spiritual darkness, every period of inconsistent living, and every struggle with besetting sin is evidence that regeneration never occurred. The New Testament is full of genuine believers who experienced profound spiritual failure, Peter’s denial, David’s adultery and murder, the Corinthian church’s carnality, the Galatian churches’ defection. None of these are presented as evidence of the absence of regeneration; they are presented as evidence of the need for repentance, restoration, and the continued sanctifying work of the Spirit. The distinguishing mark between the regenerate believer who stumbles and the unregenerate person who finally departs is precisely what 1 John establishes: the regenerate believer returns, grieves, repents, and the life of the new birth continues; the unregenerate apostate departs and does not return, because the seed of the new birth was never genuinely planted.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.”

1 Peter 1:3–4, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Regeneration	The instantaneous, supernatural, monergistic act of the Holy Spirit by which He imparts new spiritual life to the dead sinner, transforming the inner person (mind, affections, will, heart) from spiritual death and bondage to spiritual life and freedom, thereby enabling and producing the repentance and faith through which the sinner is united to Christ. Regeneration precedes faith in the logical order (1 John 5:1; 4:7; 2:29). It is entirely God's work (John 1:13; 1 Peter 1:3; James 1:18), accomplished through the instrument of the Word (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18), and is irreversible (1 John 3:9; 1 Peter 1:3–5). Also called the new birth, spiritual resurrection, or quickening.
Monergism	From the Greek monos (alone) and ergon (work). The theological affirmation that regeneration is entirely and exclusively the work of God, with no cooperative contribution from the sinner. The Spirit acts alone in imparting new spiritual life; the sinner contributes nothing and receives the new birth as the pure, sovereign gift of divine grace. Grounded in John 1:13 ("not of the will of man, but of God"), Ephesians 2:1–5 ("dead in trespasses... made us alive"), and James 1:18 ("in the exercise of His will He brought us forth"). Contrasted with synergism, which attributes a cooperative role to the human will in the reception of regenerating grace.
Gennaomai Anōthen	Greek: the phrase in John 3:3 typically translated "born again", combining gennaomai (to be born, generated) and anōthen (again / from above). The deliberate ambiguity of anōthen captures both the temporal dimension (a second birth, a new beginning) and the spatial/ontological dimension (a birth whose origin is from above, from the divine realm, from the Spirit rather than the flesh). Nicodemus takes only the temporal meaning (v. 4); Jesus' clarification in vv. 5–8 emphasizes the spatial/ontological dimension, the new birth comes from above, from the Spirit who moves as He wills, and cannot be produced by any act of the flesh.
Heart of Stone / Heart of Flesh	The contrasting images in Ezekiel 36:26 describing the unregenerate and regenerate conditions of the human heart. The heart of stone is the hardened, self-enclosed, God-resistant heart of the unregenerate person, not responsive to the Word of God, not yielding to the Spirit's influence, unable to fulfill the covenant obligations of love and obedience. The heart of flesh is the soft, responsive, yielding heart of the regenerate person, sensitive to God's Word, oriented toward obedience, capable of genuine love for God and neighbor. The transformation from stone to flesh is accomplished by God alone: "I will remove the heart of stone... and give you a heart of flesh", it is monergistic divine surgery, not cooperative spiritual therapy.
New Covenant	The covenant promised through the prophets Jeremiah (31:31–34) and Ezekiel (36:25–27) and established in the blood of Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:6–13; 9:15). The New Covenant's distinctive provisions include the writing of God's law on the heart (internalization rather than mere external obligation), the full and final forgiveness of sins (Jeremiah 31:34), the universal knowledge of God among all members of the covenant community, and the indwelling of the Spirit who produces the obedience the law requires (Ezekiel 36:27). The new birth is the personal reception of the New Covenant's distinctive benefits, the regeneration promised in Ezekiel's new heart and new spirit now fulfilled in those who are born of the Spirit.
Quickening	The older theological term (from the Latin vivificatio and the English "quick," meaning alive) for the Spirit's act of imparting spiritual life to the dead sinner, an alternative designation for regeneration, particularly in older Reformed and Puritan sources. Grounded in Ephesians 2:5 (suzōopoieō, "made alive together"), Colossians 2:13, and John 5:21 ("the Son also gives life to whom He wishes"). The quickening metaphor emphasizes the transition from death to life that is the essence of the regenerating act, and the parallel with Christ's resurrection (both

	described by the same Greek verb) establishes that the power involved is the same resurrection power of the Spirit.
Palingenesia	Greek: palingenesia, “regeneration,” literally “birth again” (palin, again; genesis, birth, origin). Used in Titus 3:5 (“the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit”) and Matthew 19:28 (of the eschatological renewal of all things). The Titus 3:5 usage is the specific New Testament term for the individual’s new birth by the Spirit. Its combination with “renewing” (anakainōsis) in Titus 3:5 captures both the retrospective dimension (a re-generating of what existed) and the prospective dimension (a renewal toward the image of Christ that will be consummated in glorification).
Spiritual Death	The condition of every unregenerate human being, described in Ephesians 2:1–5 as being “dead in trespasses and sins.” Spiritual death is not the annihilation of the person or the cessation of consciousness; it is the complete absence of spiritual life, the incapacity to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3), to come to Christ (John 6:44), to subject the mind to God’s law (Romans 8:7), or to receive spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:14). Spiritual death is the condition from which regeneration rescues the sinner, by the same resurrection power that raised Christ from the dead (Ephesians 2:5; Romans 8:11). The monergism of regeneration is directly grounded in the totality of spiritual death: dead people do not cooperate in their own resurrection.
Apostasy	The final, complete, and irreversible falling away from an apparent faith in Christ, involving the abandonment of the Christian profession, the rejection of Christ, and the persistent refusal of repentance. The New Testament distinguishes genuine apostasy (which, according to 1 John 2:19, demonstrates that the apostate was never genuinely regenerate: “they were not really of us”) from the spiritual failures and backslidings of genuine believers, who may sin grievously but ultimately return in repentance. The Hebrews warning passages (6:4–6; 10:26–31) describe apostasy in terms that are consistent with the Reformed account: the apostasy described is real, serious, and catastrophic, but it demonstrates the absence of genuine regeneration rather than the reversal of it.
Evidences of Regeneration	The Spirit-produced fruits of the new birth that, according to 1 John, provide pastoral and personal evidence that regeneration has genuinely occurred: faith in Christ as the Son of God (1 John 5:1), love for the brethren (1 John 3:14), practice of righteousness rather than habitual, unrepentant sin (1 John 2:29; 3:9), and the overcoming of the world through faith (1 John 5:4). These evidences are not conditions for earning or maintaining the new birth; they are the inevitable fruits that the new life implanted by the Spirit will invariably produce. Their presence provides positive evidence of regeneration; their complete and persistent absence provides evidence that regeneration has not genuinely occurred.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the new birth is the most important event in any human being's existence, more important than physical birth, more important than any subsequent spiritual experience, more important than baptism, church membership, or any other religious rite or event. It is the event on which eternal life depends. "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3), the negative is absolute, the scope is universal, and the exception is nonexistent. No religious achievement, no moral performance, no cultural Christianity, no family heritage, no sincere religious intention is a substitute for the sovereign, Spirit-wrought, life-giving event of the new birth. We must believe this with all the urgency it demands, not merely as a theological proposition but as the most practically urgent truth about the human condition.

We must believe that the new birth is entirely God's work, that the monergism of regeneration is not a theological nicety but the essential structure of the grace that rescues a person who is genuinely, totally, and irreversibly dead in trespasses and sins. This belief has total and thoroughgoing implications. It means that the new birth cannot be earned, produced, or manipulated by any human religious program. It means that the difference between the person who is born again and the person who is not is not a difference in the persons themselves but a difference in the sovereign grace of the Spirit who has moved in one and not (yet) in the other. And it means that the appropriate response to both the fact of one's own new birth and the fact of another's spiritual death is the same: gratitude and dependence, not pride or condescension.

We must also believe that the new birth is permanent, that the one who is genuinely born of God is a child of God forever, held by the power of the same God who brought forth the new life and who will not abandon the work He has begun. This permanence is not a license for moral complacency; it is the ground of the most enduring, most warfare-tested, most suffering-enduring assurance available to the human soul. The believer who doubts her new birth because of her spiritual failures has misunderstood what the new birth is: not a performance she must sustain, but a life that has been given to her by a sovereign God who gives what He gives without taking it back, because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29, NASB 1995).

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that the doctrine of regeneration should produce is a deeply personal, inward-looking wonder at the sovereign grace that found you dead and made you alive. This is not the wonder of an interesting theological discovery; it is the wonder of someone who has understood, for perhaps the first time with full clarity, that the life she is living, the life of faith, the life of love for God and His people, the life of growing holiness and deepening prayer and increasing delight in the Word, was not produced by her own spiritual effort or religious sincerity. It was given to her, at a moment she may or may not be able to identify, by the sovereign act of the Spirit who moved as He wills and chose to give her life. The appropriate response to this discovery is not "I am so glad I decided to follow Christ" but "I am so glad the Spirit made me alive when I was dead, and gave me the faith to follow the Christ I could not previously desire."

Desire the practical, daily reality of what the new birth has made you. You are a new creation; the old things have passed away and new things have come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The desires, affections, and orientations that the Spirit implanted in regeneration are genuinely yours, they are the most real and most essentially you things about

you, and they are always pressing toward the holiness and the intimacy with God that constitute the new life's proper expression. Desire to live fully from within those Spirit-given desires, rather than from within the old patterns that the flesh still offers. Desire to be what you already are, by the Spirit's sovereign gift, more completely and more consistently than you have been. This is not the striving of someone trying to become something she is not; it is the progress of someone learning to live out of what she genuinely is, by the grace of the God who made her new.

Desire, above all, to be used by God as an instrument through whom the Spirit exercises the sovereign work of regeneration in the lives of others. The preacher who understands regeneration will preach with a combination of urgency (the new birth is the only thing that matters) and dependence (the new birth is entirely the Spirit's work). The evangelist who understands regeneration will share the gospel with the combination of earnestness (she is sowing the seed through which the Spirit regenerates) and humility (she cannot force the seed to germinate; that is the Spirit's sovereign prerogative). Desire to be the planter; desire to be the waterer; and leave the giving of the increase to the God who alone can give it (1 Corinthians 3:6–7).

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read John 3:1–21 slowly and in its entirety as a single dramatic and theological encounter. Note the movement from Nicodemus's opening flattery (v. 2), through Jesus' shattering interruption (v. 3), through Nicodemus's repeated misunderstanding (vv. 4, 9), to Jesus' extended theological explanation (vv. 5–8, 10–15), to the gospel declaration of John 3:16–21. Ask: why does Jesus not merely correct Nicodemus's misunderstanding but press the necessity of the new birth even more emphatically? What does the wind/Spirit comparison of verse 8 add to the theology of regeneration that the preceding verses have not yet said? And what is the relationship between the necessity of the new birth (vv. 3–8) and the love of God that sent the Son (v. 16), are they in tension, or is one the resolution of the other?
- Read Ezekiel 36:25–27 and then re-read John 3:1–8, noting the specific linguistic and conceptual connections between the two passages. What does Ezekiel promise that corresponds to Jesus' "born of water and the Spirit"? What does Ezekiel promise about the new spirit and the new heart that corresponds to Jesus' account of the new birth? What does Ezekiel promise about the Spirit's role in producing obedience (v. 27) that corresponds to the New Testament's account of regeneration producing the fruits of the new life? And what does Jesus' rebuke of Nicodemus in verse 10 ("Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?") suggest about the relationship between Old Testament prophetic expectation and New Covenant fulfillment in the doctrine of regeneration?
- Work through the Johannine tests of regeneration in 1 John, faith in Christ (5:1), love for the brethren (3:14), practice of righteousness (2:29; 3:9), and overcoming the world (5:4), and apply them honestly to your own life. Not with the morbid introspection that produces anxiety but with the honest, Spirit-assisted assessment that 1 John itself invites: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13, NASB 1995). Which of the four evidences is most clearly present in your life? Which is least clearly present? And what does the overall picture suggest about the genuineness of the new birth in your experience?
- Identify one or two specific people in your life who appear to have some form of religious involvement but in whom the evidences of the new birth, specifically, genuine faith in Christ, love for the brethren, directional movement away from sin and toward God, appear to be absent or very unclear. Pray for them specifically, asking the Spirit to do in them the sovereign, life-giving work of regeneration that only He can do. Then plan a specific conversation in which you will, with gentleness and compassion, both share the

gospel and explore with them the question of whether the new birth has genuinely occurred in their experience. The urgency of John 3:7 (“You must be born again”) must be matched by the pastoral care with which that urgency is conveyed.

- Read 1 Peter 1:3–5 as a declaration of the permanence and the eschatological hope of the new birth. Note the three adjectives used to describe the inheritance: imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. Note the description of the believer’s present protection: “protected by the power of God through faith.” And note the ground of the entire hope: “according to His great mercy” and “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Then use this passage as the template for a prayer of thanksgiving for your own new birth and its permanent, Spirit-guarded fruits, and as a declaration of assurance to any member of your study group who is struggling with doubts about the genuineness of their regeneration.

Key Texts: *John 3:1–8; 1:12–13; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; Titus 3:5; Ezekiel 36:25–27; James 1:18; 1 John 2:29; 3:9, 14; 4:7; 5:1–4, 13; Ephesians 2:1–5; 2 Corinthians 5:17*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how central was the concept of “regeneration” or “the new birth” in your understanding of what it means to be a Christian? Did you think of the Christian life primarily in terms of a decision you made (conversion), a relationship you have (with Christ), or a transformation you underwent (new birth)? How does the lesson’s claim that regeneration is the most decisive and most invisible event of the believer’s existence either confirm or reorient your prior understanding? And what is your honest assessment of your own new birth: can you identify the Spirit’s work in you through the evidences that 1 John describes?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read John 3:1–8. What is Nicodemus’s social and religious standing (v. 1)? What does his opening statement reveal about his assessment of Jesus (v. 2)? How does Jesus’ response in verse 3 relate to Nicodemus’s opening statement, does He answer it, ignore it, or redirect it? What is the force of the phrase “born again” / “born from above” in verse 3? In verse 6, what is the principle that Jesus articulates about the relationship between flesh-origin and Spirit-origin? And in verse 8, what does the wind/Spirit comparison establish about the character of the Spirit’s regenerating work that the preceding verses have not yet explicitly stated?
- Read John 1:12–13. In verse 12, what is the relationship between receiving Christ and becoming children of God? What does it mean to receive Christ (“believed in His name”)? In verse 13, the new birth is described by a three-fold negation (“not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man”) followed by a positive affirmation (“but of God”). What does each element of the negation exclude as a source of the new birth? And what does the positive affirmation establish about the sole source of the new birth?
- Read 1 Peter 1:3, 23 together. In verse 3, what is the ground of the new birth (“according to His great...”)?) What does the new birth produce (“to a living hope through...”)?) What is the goal of the new birth (“to obtain an inheritance...”)?) In verse 23, what is the instrument of the new birth (“through...”)?) And how does verse 23’s description of the Word as “living and enduring” relate to the new life and the imperishable inheritance described in verse 3?
- Read Ezekiel 36:25–27. What three distinct acts does God promise to perform? What is the relationship between the water cleansing (v. 25) and the giving of the new heart (v. 26), are they sequential, simultaneous, or aspects of the same act? What is the specific language used for the old heart that is to be replaced (“heart of stone”), and what does the stone metaphor suggest about the nature of the spiritual problem? What is the language used for the new heart (“heart of flesh”), and what does the flesh metaphor suggest about the nature of the solution? And what is the stated outcome of the transformation (v. 27): what will the people do after receiving the new heart?
- Read 1 John 5:1; 4:7; 2:29 together. In each verse, what is the grammatical relationship between the present-tense action (believes, loves, practices righteousness) and the perfect-tense new birth (gegennētai, “has been born”)? What does the perfect tense indicate about the timing of the new birth relative to the present action (completed prior act vs. ongoing present action)? How do the three verses together establish the logical priority of regeneration over the evidences of the new life that flow from it?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the monergism of regeneration is established by four converging lines of biblical testimony: the unregenerate's incapacity (Ephesians 2:1–5; John 6:44), the language of the new birth as entirely God's act (John 1:13; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3), the use of resurrection language (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13), and the surgical metaphor of Ezekiel 36:26. Evaluate the strength of each line of evidence. Which do you find most exegetically compelling? Are there texts or arguments that would challenge the monergistic interpretation of any of these lines? And how do the four lines together build a cumulative case that is stronger than any single line alone?
- The lesson argues that 1 John 5:1 ("Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God") establishes the logical priority of regeneration over faith through the perfect passive participle gegennētai. Evaluate this grammatical argument. Is it exegetically compelling? How does the same grammatical pattern in 1 John 4:7 and 2:29, where love and righteous practice are similarly expressed in the present tense while the new birth is in the perfect passive, strengthen or weaken the argument for regeneration's logical priority? And how does the Arminian tradition respond to this grammatical evidence, and what is the Reformed reply?
- The lesson distinguishes regeneration from conversion, baptism, and sanctification. Working through each distinction carefully: (a) What is the specific difference between regeneration and conversion, and why does confusing them lead either to the Arminian error (making regeneration depend on conversion) or an opposite error? (b) What is the Reformed position on the relationship between water baptism and the new birth, and how does Titus 3:5 support that position? (c) What is the difference between regeneration and sanctification, and why is the absence of any sanctification not evidence of regeneration-without-sanctification but of the absence of regeneration itself?
- The lesson presents the evidences of regeneration from 1 John as diagnostic tools for pastoral care. It describes two distinct uses: assurance for the genuinely regenerate but anxious believer, and warning and invitation for those in whom the evidences are absent. Are these two uses compatible, can the same tests that provide assurance for one person function as warning for another without creating a culture of spiritual anxiety? How does the purpose of 1 John 5:13 ("I write these things to you who believe... so that you may know") establish that the evidences are primarily designed for assurance rather than for anxiety? And how does the distinction between genuine regeneration (permanent, progressive, fruitful) and false regeneration (not present in the first place) protect the doctrine of assurance from false comfort?
- The lesson treats 1 John 2:19 ("they were not really of us") as the apostolic explanation for apparent apostasy: those who finally fall away demonstrate thereby that they were never genuinely regenerate. Evaluate this interpretation. Is it exegetically consistent with the text of 1 John 2:19? How does this interpretation relate to the Hebrews warning passages (6:4–6; 10:26–31), which are sometimes cited as evidence that genuine believers can fall from saving grace? How does the distinction between the regenerate believer who stumbles (who returns, grieves, and repents) and the apostate (who finally departs and does not return) help to navigate the Hebrews passages without either dismissing their seriousness or concluding that genuine believers can be finally lost?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson opens with the claim that regeneration is "the most decisive and most invisible event of the believer's entire existence." It precedes the first tear of repentance, the first exercise of conscious faith, the first prayer. If this is true, then the believer who has been born again may have experienced the new birth without being conscious of it at the moment it occurred. Does this description match your own experience of coming to faith? Can you identify a specific moment when the new birth occurred, or is the new birth

something you can only identify retrospectively through the evidences of its fruits? How does the lesson's account of the logical priority of regeneration over faith address the concern that a person who cannot point to a specific conversion moment may not be genuinely saved?

- The lesson describes the monergism of regeneration as the guarantee that there is nothing in the believer to which she can trace her new birth, no prior willingness, no spiritual openness, no responsive quality that distinguished her from the unregenerate. Do you personally find this claim humbling and liberating, or do you find it troubling? If troubling, trace the source of the trouble: is it the concern that monergism makes the sinner a mere passive object rather than a genuine person? Is it the concern that monergism makes God seem arbitrary? Or is it something else? Then work through how the lesson's account of monergism addresses each specific concern, and evaluate whether the biblical evidence for monergism is strong enough to require receiving it even if it remains pastorally difficult.
- The lesson argues that the permanence of regeneration grounds the most enduring and most warfare-tested assurance available to the believing soul. Are you currently living in the assurance that the permanence of the new birth should produce? Or are you experiencing anxiety about whether your new birth was genuine or whether the spiritual failures of your present or past have undone it? If the latter: identify the specific biblical truth that the lesson provides for your specific anxiety. Is the concern that your faith has been too inconsistent? (The permanence of the new birth does not depend on the consistency of the faith it produced.) Is the concern that your sin has been too grievous? (1 John 2:19 distinguishes final apostasy, which proves unregeneration, from grievous sin, which proves the need for repentance, and the regenerate believer returns.) Let the specific biblical truth address the specific anxiety.
- The lesson's treatment of the Ezekiel promise (36:25–27) establishes that the new birth is not a New Testament novelty but the fulfillment of a specific Old Testament promise. How does understanding the new birth as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophetic expectation change the way you read the Old Testament? Specifically: when you read the prophetic literature's descriptions of Israel's failure to walk in God's statutes (the very failure that the new heart and new spirit are designed to address), do you see that failure as evidence of the absence of genuine regeneration among the Old Testament people of God? What does the progressive-covenantal account of regeneration across the two Testaments suggest about the continuity and the differences between Old Covenant and New Covenant experience of the Spirit's work?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with the reading of Ezekiel 36:25–27 as prophecy, not as a historical text about ancient Israel but as the promise of the sovereign God directed toward every person who has ever received its fulfillment in the new birth. Read it as Jesus' background, as the promised reality that He told Nicodemus a teacher of Israel should have understood. Read it as your own story: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes." If you have been born again, this is what happened to you. This is the divine surgery the Spirit performed at the center of your being when He moved as He willed in your life. Let the specificity and the sovereignty of the promise press itself upon you with the weight it deserves.

Pray with thanksgiving for the monergism of your own new birth, for the fact that you contributed nothing to it, because there was nothing you could contribute from within the condition of spiritual death that was your natural inheritance from Adam. Thank the Spirit for doing in you what you could not do for yourself: for removing the heart of stone, for giving the heart of flesh, for putting Himself within you as the bond of union with the risen Christ and the seal of the inheritance that awaits you. Thank the Father whose sovereign mercy was the ground of the new birth (1 Peter 1:3). Thank the Son whose resurrection was the template and the power of your own spiritual resurrection (Ephesians 2:5–6). Thank the Spirit who moved as He willed and chose to move in your life with the life-giving power of the new creation.

Pray for the specific people in your life who appear to be spiritually dead, in whom the evidences of the new birth that 1 John describes are absent or very unclear. Pray for them with the theological realism of John 3:6: "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," and what the flesh produces cannot elevate itself to the level of the Spirit. The persons you are praying for cannot regenerate themselves; they cannot produce the new birth by any act of religious will. The only power that can do what needs to be done in their lives is the power of the Spirit who moves as He wills. Ask the Spirit to move in their lives as He has moved in yours, sovereignly, powerfully, with the creative power of 2 Corinthians 4:6, shining the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ into the darkness of a heart that is currently closed to that light.

Pray for the ministry of the Word in your congregation and in the broader church. Ask the Spirit to attend every faithful proclamation of the gospel with the regenerating power that only He can supply, to use the seed of the Word as the instrument through which the new birth is effected in the hearts of those who sit in the pews, not merely hearing but being brought to life by the same power that raised Christ from the dead. Pray for the preacher to have the specific combination of urgency (the new birth is the only thing that matters) and dependence (the new birth is entirely the Spirit's work) that faithful preaching of John 3 demands. Pray that the sermons preached in your church would have the character of the wind of John 3:8, that the Spirit would move through them as He wills, producing life where He chooses, in ways that confound human prediction and confirm divine sovereignty.

Close with 1 Peter 1:3–5 as a corporate declaration of the new birth's permanence and its eschatological hope. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Speak it together as those who are born again, whose new birth is real, permanent, Spirit-guarded, and moving toward the eschatological consummation

of the living hope to which it gives birth. Let the blessing that opens the passage (“Blessed be the God and Father”) be both the theological statement and the lived experience of a congregation that has received what it is describing.

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

John 3:3, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 3:1–8; 1:12–13; 1 Peter 1:3–5, 23; Titus 3:5; Ezekiel 36:25–27; James 1:18; 1 John 2:29; 3:9, 14; 5:1–4, 13; Ephesians 2:1–6; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 5:17

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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