

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 5: THE SPIRIT AND THE APPLICATION OF REDEMPTION

Lesson 12

Regeneration

Born Again by the Spirit

The Supernatural New Birth That Precedes and Produces Faith

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

“That Which Is Born of the Spirit Is Spirit”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

Lesson 11 established effectual calling as the Spirit's sovereign, inward work by which He makes the outward gospel call operative in the heart of the elect sinner, the foundational pneumatological act in the *ordo salutis* that makes everything else possible. Lesson 12 moves to the next act in the logical sequence: regeneration, the new birth by which the Spirit imparts spiritual life to the soul that effectual calling has opened. These two acts, effectual calling and regeneration, are so closely related that they are sometimes treated as synonymous or as two descriptions of the same event from different angles. There is genuine overlap: both involve the Spirit's sovereign, inward, life-giving work in the dead sinner; both precede faith rather than following it; and both are entirely the Spirit's accomplishment rather than the sinner's cooperation. But the tradition has found it theologically useful to distinguish them: effectual calling describes the Spirit's work of making the gospel call effective, reaching from without to within; regeneration describes the Spirit's work of imparting new spiritual life, the positive creation of what was previously absent. Calling addresses the external-to-internal movement; regeneration addresses the dead-to-alive transformation.

Regeneration is, without question, one of the most practically significant doctrines in all of Pneumatology and Soteriology. It is the answer to the most personal and most urgent of all spiritual questions: how does a person pass from spiritual death to spiritual life? How does the one who was blind to spiritual reality come to see it? How does the one who was deaf to the voice of God come to hear it? How does the one whose desires were entirely oriented toward sin and self come to desire God, to love Christ, to cherish the Word, and to hate what he previously loved? The answer, in every case, is the same: regeneration. The Spirit of God creates in the soul a new spiritual nature, new desires, new capacity for spiritual perception, new love for what God loves and hatred of what God hates, and the entire subsequent Christian life is the living out and the progressive transformation of the new nature that regeneration creates.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1–8 is the primary New Testament text on regeneration, and it establishes the doctrine's most fundamental characteristics with the authority of the Son of God Himself: regeneration is necessary (unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God); regeneration is supernatural (what is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit); regeneration is sovereign and mysterious (the wind blows where it will); and regeneration is the Spirit's work rather than any human achievement. These four characteristics, necessary, supernatural, sovereign, and Spirit-accomplished, provide the theological framework for everything else this lesson will examine.

This lesson will also address a question that has significant pastoral and apologetic consequences: what is the relationship between regeneration and faith? Does regeneration precede faith (the Reformed view) or does faith precede regeneration (the Arminian and evangelical majority view)? The answer to this question determines how we understand the nature of faith, the nature of human spiritual capacity, and the nature of the Spirit's sovereign

work, and it has concrete implications for evangelism, pastoral counseling, and the assurance of salvation.

I. Regeneration Defined

The Sovereign, Instantaneous, Supernatural Impartation of Spiritual Life

Regeneration (from the Latin *regeneratio*, re-birth; Greek: *palingenesia*, new genesis; or, in the language of John 3, the being “born again” or “born from above”, *genōthē anōthen*) is the sovereign, instantaneous, supernatural act of the Holy Spirit by which He imparts new spiritual life to the spiritually dead sinner, creating within that person a new nature with new desires, new capacity for spiritual perception, and new orientation toward God and His Word.

Regeneration is neither a gradual process (as sanctification is) nor a human achievement (as no act of sovereign divine grace can be). It is a single, definite, point-in-time act of divine creation, the moment at which the Spirit breathes spiritual life into the spiritually dead soul, transforming it from death to life as instantaneously and as sovereignly as God breathed physical life into the dust of Adam’s body in Genesis 2:7.

Four characteristics of regeneration demand theological precision. First, it is sovereign: regeneration occurs entirely by the will of the Spirit, not by the will or initiative of the sinner. John 1:12–13 makes this explicit: those who receive Christ and believe in His name “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” Three human sources of regeneration are explicitly excluded, blood (natural descent), the will of the flesh (natural human desire), and the will of man (human decision), before the one divine source is affirmed: born of God. Regeneration is God’s act, not man’s.

Second, it is instantaneous: regeneration is not a process but an event, a single point at which the sinner crosses from spiritual death to spiritual life. This does not mean that the effects of regeneration are instantaneous, the new nature that regeneration creates is progressively developed through sanctification over the entirety of the Christian life. But the regeneration itself is a punctiliar divine act, as birth is a single event even though the life that birth begins is a lengthy process. Third, it is supernatural: regeneration cannot be produced by human effort, education, environmental conditioning, or religious ritual. It is “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). The Spirit’s creative work in regeneration is as far beyond human achievement as the original creation was beyond any creaturely contribution.

Fourth, it is transformative: regeneration does not merely add a divine dimension to an otherwise unchanged human nature; it creates a genuinely new nature. The “new creation” language of 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”) points to the radical character of what regeneration accomplishes. The regenerate person is not an improved version of the unregenerate person; he is a fundamentally different kind of person, one who possesses a new spiritual nature, new desires, new capacity for spiritual perception, and a new orienting love for God and for what God loves.

II. Jesus and Nicodemus: The Necessity and Nature of the New Birth

John 3:1–8, The Definitive Christological Teaching on Regeneration

A. You Must Be Born Again: The Necessity of Regeneration

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1–8 is the foundational New Testament text on regeneration, and it opens with a declaration of absolute necessity: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, NASB 1995). The necessity is categorical and universal: unless, there is no exception, no alternative, no supplement. The new birth is not one pathway to the kingdom among several; it is the only pathway. Without it, entry into and even perception of the kingdom is impossible.

The Greek phrase translated “born again” is *genōthē anōthen*, which carries a productive ambiguity: *anōthen* can mean both “again” (a second birth, a fresh beginning) and “from above” (a birth from a divine source). Nicodemus understands the temporal sense and objects on the basis of its physical impossibility: “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” (v. 4). Jesus’ response neither dismisses Nicodemus’s objection nor abandons the metaphor; He clarifies and deepens it by specifying the divine source of the birth He is describing: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (vv. 5–6). The new birth is a birth from above, a birth generated by the Spirit of God rather than by any natural human capacity, and this divine source is precisely what makes it both necessary and possible.

The phrase “born of water and the Spirit” in verse 5 has been interpreted in several ways in the history of exegesis: as a reference to Christian baptism and the Spirit; as a reference to physical birth (water) and spiritual birth (Spirit); as a reference to the Word of God and the Spirit (cf. 1 Peter 1:23; Ephesians 5:26); or as a unified reference to the Spirit’s cleansing and life-giving work (the water and the Spirit being two dimensions of the single new-birth event, echoing Ezekiel 36:25–27’s promise of sprinkling clean water and putting the Spirit within). The most contextually and theologically satisfying reading takes the water and the Spirit as a unified reference to the Spirit’s work, echoing Ezekiel 36: the Spirit cleanses (water) and regenerates (Spirit) in a single sovereign act of New Covenant grace. The water is not a separate element from the Spirit’s work but a dimension of it.

B. The Wind Blows Where It Wills: The Sovereignty of Regeneration

Jesus’ description of regeneration reaches its most striking expression in the wind analogy of verse 8: “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). The analogy is pneumatologically rich in ways that a translation cannot fully capture: the Greek word for “wind” (*pneuma*) is the same word translated “Spirit” throughout the passage. Jesus is comparing the Spirit to the wind, and in doing so, He exploits the same semantic range of *pneuma* / *ruach* that we explored in Lesson 6. The Spirit, like the wind, blows where He wills, His movements cannot be predicted, controlled, domesticated, or manipulated by human

beings. His sovereign freedom is the pneumatological ground of both the mystery and the certainty of regeneration.

Two things are true of the wind simultaneously: you hear its sound (its effects are real, audible, and undeniable), and you do not know where it comes from or where it is going (its origin and direction are beyond human prediction and control). Similarly, two things are true of regeneration simultaneously: its effects are real and undeniable (the regenerate person exhibits the evidences of new birth that 1 John will enumerate), and its origin is entirely in the sovereign will of the Spirit (it cannot be predicted, controlled, or produced by any human initiative). The regenerate person is like someone who discovers he is standing in the wind: he knows the wind is blowing because he feels it; he does not know when it will blow or why it blows on him rather than on another. The sovereign mystery of regeneration is not an embarrassment; it is the guarantee of its divine character. If human beings could produce it or control it, it would not be regeneration; it would be self-improvement.

The sovereignty of regeneration as described in John 3:8 is the Christological confirmation of what the Old Testament promised in Ezekiel 36:26–27 (“I will give you a new heart... I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes”) and what effectual calling (Lesson 11) establishes from the soteriological side: the new birth is God’s work, accomplished by the sovereign Spirit who breathes where He wills, in the hearts of those whom the Father has chosen and drawn to the Son. Nicodemus, for all his learning and his status as “a teacher of Israel” (v. 10), has not understood this. He has been operating with a framework in which spiritual achievement is accessible to the humanly wise and ethically diligent. Jesus dismantles this framework with the wind: the Spirit goes where He wills, and no amount of human wisdom or ethical attainment can substitute for or produce the birth from above.

*“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” | “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”
| “The wind blows where it wishes, so is everyone who is born of the Spirit”*

John 3:3, 6, 8, NASB 1995

III. The Logical Priority of Regeneration over Faith

The Reformed Sequence and Its Scriptural Grounding

A. The Question and Its Significance

One of the most practically and theologically important questions in all of evangelical soteriology is this: which comes first, regeneration or faith? Does the Spirit regenerate the sinner so that he can believe, or does the sinner believe and then receive regeneration as a consequence? The question may seem arcane, a matter for academic theology seminars rather than for the practical Christian life. But its implications are concrete and far-reaching. If faith precedes regeneration, then faith is a natural human capacity that the unregenerate sinner exercises on the basis of his own free will. If regeneration precedes faith, then faith is itself the fruit of the Spirit’s regenerating work, a capacity created in the sinner by the new birth rather than a capacity exercised by the sinner to produce the new birth. The two positions have

fundamentally different understandings of human spiritual ability, the nature of saving faith, and the extent of divine sovereignty in salvation.

B. The Reformed Position and Its Scriptural Case

The Reformed position is that regeneration logically precedes faith: the Spirit must first create spiritual life in the dead sinner before that sinner can exercise saving faith. The case rests on three converging lines of scriptural evidence. First, the Johannine evidence already established in Lesson 11: John 6:44 (“no one can come to Me unless the Father draws him”) and John 6:65 (“no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father”) establish the absolute spiritual inability of the unregenerate person. Coming to Christ, which is the same act as believing in Christ, is impossible apart from the Father’s drawing and granting. The drawing and granting precede the coming; therefore the sovereign enabling of the Spirit precedes faith.

Second, the 1 John evidence: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1, NASB 1995). The Greek of this verse is exegetically decisive: the verb translated “believes” (*pisteuōn*) is a present active participle, while the verb translated “is born” (*gegennētai*) is a perfect passive. In Greek, the perfect tense indicates a completed past action with continuing present results: “whoever is currently believing has been born [has already been born] of God.” The believing is described in the present tense as an ongoing activity; the being born of God is described as a completed prior event whose results continue into the present. The grammar indicates that the new birth precedes and produces the ongoing act of believing: the one who is currently believing is doing so because he has already been born of God. Regeneration is the cause; faith is the effect.

Third, the Ephesians 2 evidence: Ephesians 2:1–5 describes the unregenerate person as “dead in trespasses and sins.” The dead cannot exercise faith any more than they can exercise any other living function. Life must precede the exercise of living faculties; spiritual life must precede the exercise of spiritual faculties. The Spirit’s making us alive together with Christ (v. 5) is the act that creates the capacity for the faith that then follows. Verse 8 adds: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The Reformed reading of this verse takes “that” (*touto*) to refer to the whole saving event (grace, faith, and salvation together), not merely to the grace, the gift of God encompasses the faith as well as the grace. Faith itself is the gift of God, given through regeneration, not the human contribution that activates the divine gift.

C. The Evangelical Majority View and Its Problems

The evangelical majority position, broadly shared by Arminian, non-Reformed Baptist, and many evangelical Anglican traditions, holds that faith logically precedes regeneration: the sinner exercises faith in response to the gospel, and God then regenerates the sinner on the basis of that faith. On this view, regeneration is the divine response to human faith; faith is the condition that triggers the divine action of new birth.

This view faces the same exegetical obstacles identified in Lesson 11’s discussion of prevenient grace. If the unregenerate person is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1), then the exercise of saving faith, which is a genuinely spiritual act, is impossible for the unregenerate

person. Dead men do not believe any more than they breathe. The evangelical majority position responds by appealing to prevenient grace: God restores sufficient spiritual capacity to all fallen humans that they can exercise faith if they choose. But this is to add a doctrine that the text does not teach in order to avoid a conclusion that the text does teach. The text says dead, not disabled; the appropriate response to dead is resurrection, not assistance.

The 1 John 5:1 grammar is particularly difficult for the faith-precedes-regeneration view: if the perfect passive gegennētai (“has been born”) indicates a prior completed act, then the verse is saying that the one currently believing has already been regenerated, which means regeneration preceded the belief, not followed it. Attempts to interpret the verse in the opposite direction require reading the grammar against its natural force and ignoring the consistent pattern of 1 John’s use of the perfect tense for the prior divine work that produces the present human response.

IV. The Instrument of Regeneration: The Word and the Spirit

1 Peter 1:23 and James 1:18, Born Through the Living Word

Regeneration is entirely the Spirit’s work, it is not the sinner’s contribution or the result of any human activity or institutional rite. But the Spirit ordinarily works through means, and the primary means through which He works in regeneration is the Word of God. Two New Testament texts establish this with particular clarity.

First Peter 1:23 states: “You have been born again not of perishable seed but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God” (NASB 1995). The metaphor is agricultural: just as physical birth requires a seed, spiritual birth requires a seed, and the seed through which the Spirit regenerates is the living and enduring Word of God. The Word is “imperishable” (aphthartos) in contrast to the “perishable” (phthartos) seed of natural generation, the same quality of life-giving permanence that characterizes the Word itself (v. 25: “the word of the Lord endures forever”). The Spirit regenerates through the proclamation and reception of the Word, which is why faithful, Spirit-dependent gospel preaching is irreplaceable: it is the instrument through which the sovereign Spirit works the miracle of new birth.

James 1:18 reinforces the point from a different angle: “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). Again, three pneumatologically decisive elements appear: the sovereign divine will (“in the exercise of His will”, boulēthēis, a divine decision reflecting deliberate purpose), the divine action (“brought us forth”, apekuesen, gave us birth), and the instrument (“by the word of truth”). God’s sovereign will brings forth the new birth through the Word of truth. Neither the Word alone (without the Spirit’s life-giving power) nor the Spirit alone (without the ordinary instrument of the Word) produces regeneration in the normal course of the Spirit’s ministry: it is the Spirit working through and with the Word who creates the new birth.

The relationship between the Word and the Spirit in regeneration is not one of competition or redundancy; it is a concursive relationship in which each is essential to the other. The Word

without the Spirit is a dead letter that can describe the way of life without imparting it: “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). The Spirit without the Word is an unspecified and ungrounded spiritual influence: it is the Spirit’s work through the specific content of the gospel, the news of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection, that regenerates rather than some general divine energy. This concursive relationship has a critical practical implication: if the Spirit regenerates through the Word, then the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word is the most urgently important activity the church can undertake. Every sermon faithfully preached is the Spirit’s potential instrument of regeneration. Every personal gospel conversation is the Spirit’s potential vehicle for the new birth. The church that is careless about the proclamation of the Word is careless about the primary instrument of the Spirit’s regenerating work.

V. Titus 3:5 and the Language of New Creation

The Washing of Regeneration and the Renewing of the Holy Spirit

Titus 3:5 provides the most Trinitarian and the most comprehensive single statement of regeneration in the New Testament: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (NASB 1995). The verse’s structure and pneumatological content repay careful attention.

The first pneumatological claim of the verse is negative: salvation is not on the basis of human righteous deeds. This exclusion is the familiar Pauline anti-works motif (cf. Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 3:28), but here applied specifically to the act of regeneration: the new birth is not produced by human moral effort, religious observance, or spiritual achievement. It is not the reward of the righteous but the mercy of the God who saves. The ground of regeneration is entirely divine, “according to His mercy.”

The positive pneumatological content of the verse is expressed in two parallel phrases: “the washing of regeneration” (*loutrou palingenesiaias*) and “the renewing of the Holy Spirit” (*anakainōseōs pneumatōs hagiou*). The two phrases are connected by a single preposition (“by”, *diā*), indicating that they describe a single event from two angles rather than two successive events. The “washing of regeneration” employs the same water-imagery that Ezekiel 36:25 uses for the new covenant cleansing (“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean”) and that John 3:5 uses for the new birth (“born of water and the Spirit”): the Spirit’s regenerating work includes a cleansing dimension. The “renewing of the Holy Spirit” points to the Spirit’s positive creative work: not merely cleansing what was defiled but creating what was not there, renewing (*anakainōsis*, a making-new-again, or a making-new-for-the-first-time) the spiritual nature of the soul.

The Trinitarian structure of the verse is complete: the Father saves according to His mercy, the Spirit accomplishes the washing and renewing, and Jesus Christ is the Savior through whom the Spirit is poured out. Regeneration is a Trinitarian act, consistent with the broader Trinitarian pattern that this series has established for every major divine work: the Father decrees, the Son

accomplishes, the Spirit applies. The pouring-out of the Spirit “richly” through Christ connects the individual new birth to the broader pneumatological event of Pentecost (Lesson 10): the Spirit who is poured out in regeneration is the same Spirit who was poured out on all flesh at Pentecost, and the individual’s new birth is the personal appropriation of the eschatological pneumatological reality that Pentecost inaugurated.

VI. The Evidences of Regeneration

How 1 John Identifies Those Who Have Been Born of God

If regeneration is sovereign, instantaneous, and entirely the Spirit’s work, how can a person know whether he has been regenerated? The question is not academic; it is the most personally pressing question in all of Christian life. The First Epistle of John addresses it with a combination of pastoral tenderness and theological precision that makes it the most practically useful text in the New Testament for the examination of the evidences of genuine regeneration. John presents a series of tests, each introduced by the characteristic phrase “whoever has been born of God” or “whoever is born of God”, that together constitute the New Testament’s most systematic account of what regeneration produces in those who have experienced it.

First John 2:29: “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.” The first evidence of regeneration is the practice of righteousness, not the occasional performance of right acts but the habitual pattern of a life oriented toward righteous conduct. The regenerate person does not merely know that God is righteous; he shares the orientation toward righteousness that characterizes the God from whom he has been born. The new birth creates a family resemblance: as God is righteous, His children practice righteousness.

First John 3:9: “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.” This is one of the most challenging verses in the New Testament, and it must be understood carefully. John does not say that the regenerate person never sins (cf. 1:8–2:2, where he explicitly says that all Christians do sin and need ongoing confession and forgiveness). He says that the regenerate person does not “practice” sin (ποιᾷ hamartian, the present tense indicating continuous, habitual action). The regenerate person’s life is not defined by sin; sin is no longer the characteristic, habitual orientation of the regenerate person’s existence. The new nature created in regeneration has an anti-sin orientation: “His seed abides in him”, the Spirit’s life-giving presence creates an interior resistance to the dominion of sin that makes habitual, unrepentant, lifestyle sin impossible in the truly regenerate.

First John 4:7: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” The second great evidence of regeneration is love, specifically, the love for the brethren that characterizes those who belong to the family of God. As God is love (v. 8), those born of God share the divine love-character. The new nature created in regeneration is a loving nature, oriented toward the community of those who belong to Christ.

The regenerate person does not merely know the doctrine of love or appreciate love theoretically; he loves, actually, concretely, practically, even when it is costly.

First John 5:1: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.” This provides the crucial grammatical evidence examined in Section III: the present participle (believing) follows the perfect passive (has been born), indicating that the ongoing act of believing flows from the prior completed act of new birth. But its pastoral use is equally important: the first evidence of regeneration is faith in the specific content that Jesus is the Christ, not a general religious experience or a generic spirituality, but the specific, propositional conviction that this particular Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of sinners. First John 5:4 adds the overcoming of the world by faith: “for whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith.” The regenerate life is a life of faith-victory over the world’s system of values, priorities, and temptations.

These evidences of regeneration, the practice of righteousness, the inability to make sin the habitual pattern of life, the love for the brethren, saving faith in Christ, and overcoming faith in the face of the world, are not the conditions that produce regeneration but the fruits that regeneration produces. They function as confirmatory evidence, not as earning mechanisms. Their practical use is this: the person who genuinely possesses these evidences in his life, not perfectly, but genuinely and habitually, has scriptural warrant for the assurance that he has been born of God. The person who lacks these evidences, whose life is characterized by habitual, unrepentant sin; who has no genuine love for the brethren; whose faith in Christ is nominal or formal rather than living and clinging, has scriptural warrant for the most urgent self-examination.

*“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.”*

James 1:18, NASB 1995

VII. Pastoral Significance: The New Birth and the Christian Life

What Regeneration Means for Assurance, Sanctification, and Evangelism

The doctrine of regeneration has three pastoral implications of the highest importance, each flowing directly from its theological content.

First, assurance. The regenerate person has not talked himself into a new relationship with God; he has been born into it. The new birth is not a religious experience that may have been

produced by emotional manipulation, social pressure, or the power of suggestion; it is a sovereign act of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity that creates spiritual life where none existed. The grounds of the regenerate person's assurance are therefore not primarily the intensity of his conversion experience but the evidence of his regenerate life: Does he practice righteousness? Does he love the brethren? Does he cling to Christ by faith? Does his faith overcome the world? The 1 John evidences function as the pastoral tool by which the believer examines his life for the marks of new birth and finds either confirmation of grace or grounds for self-examination.

Second, sanctification. Regeneration does not complete the Christian life; it begins it. The new nature created in regeneration contains the seeds of everything that sanctification will develop: new desires for God, new love for the Word, new hatred of sin, new capacity for spiritual perception. But these seeds require cultivation, the ongoing, Spirit-empowered, Word-saturated, community-supported growth that sanctification describes. The regenerate person is not immediately what he will be; he is definitively different from what he was. The Christian life is the progressive living out of the new nature that the Spirit created in regeneration, the progressive realization of the orientation toward God, holiness, and love that the new birth instilled. Every act of mortification of sin and every act of pursuit of holiness is the Spirit's cultivation of what He planted in regeneration.

Third, evangelism. If regeneration is the Spirit's sovereign work accomplished through the instrument of the Word, then the most practically effective thing the church can do for the unconverted is to proclaim the gospel faithfully and to pray for the Spirit's regenerating work. No technique of persuasion, no emotional appeal, no cultural accommodation, and no rhetorical sophistication can produce the new birth. Only the Spirit can do that, and He does it through the Word. The evangelist who understands regeneration will not manipulate; he will proclaim. He will not rely on the power of his presentation but on the power of the Spirit who breathes where He wills through the instrument of the gospel. He will pray for those to whom he speaks with the specific request that the Spirit would regenerate them, that the Spirit who hovered over the formless void and brought life from chaos would hover over the spiritually formless void of the hearer's soul and breathe new life into it. And he will leave the result with the sovereign God who alone can give the new birth, with the confidence that the Spirit who regenerated him can regenerate anyone He chooses to breathe upon.

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Regeneration	From the Latin <i>regeneratio</i> (re-birth); Greek: <i>palingenesia</i> (new genesis) or <i>genōthē anōthen</i> (born again/from above, John 3:3). The sovereign, instantaneous, supernatural act of the Holy Spirit by which He imparts new spiritual life to the dead sinner, creating within that person a new nature with new desires, new capacity for spiritual perception, and a new orientation toward God and His Word. Regeneration is distinguished from sanctification (gradual) by being instantaneous; from effectual calling by emphasizing the positive creation of life rather than the making-effective of the external call; and from conversion by being the cause (the divine side) of which faith and repentance are the effects (the human side).
Anōthen	Greek adverb meaning both “again” (a second time, anew) and “from above” (from God, from heaven). Used by Jesus in John 3:3 (“born anōthen”) with deliberate double meaning: Nicodemus hears “born a second time” and responds with physical impossibility; Jesus intends “born from above,” a birth generated by divine initiative. The dual meaning captures the essential character of regeneration: it is a new beginning that is simultaneously a divine impartation, a second birth that is not natural but supernatural, not human but from God.
Palingenesia	Greek: literally, “new genesis,” a coming-into-being-again. The term used in Matthew 19:28 (the cosmic renewal at the end of the age) and Titus 3:5 (“the washing of regeneration”, <i>loutrou palingenesiaias</i>). In Titus 3:5, <i>palingenesia</i> designates the individual’s new birth as a micro-version of the cosmic new creation: as God will create all things new at the consummation, He creates the regenerate person new in the new birth. The link between individual regeneration and cosmic new creation is not accidental: the Spirit who regenerates the individual sinner is the same Spirit who will renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104:30) and who makes all things new (Revelation 21:5).
Gegennētai	Greek: perfect passive of <i>gennaō</i> (to beget, to give birth to). Used in the 1 John tests of regeneration (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18) in the construction “whoever has been born (<i>gegennētai</i>) of God.” The perfect tense indicates a completed past action with present continuing results: the new birth is a single event whose effects continue. Crucially in 1 John 5:1, the perfect <i>gegennētai</i> (“has been born”) accompanies a present participle <i>pisteuōn</i> (“believing”), establishing that the completed act of new birth precedes and produces the ongoing act of believing.
Washing of Regeneration	<i>Loutrou palingenesiaias</i> , one of the two parallel phrases in Titus 3:5 describing the Spirit’s regenerating work. The image combines water

Term	Definition
	(loutrou, bath, washing) with new birth (palingenesia) to describe the Spirit's cleansing and life-giving work in a single act. The water imagery echoes Ezekiel 36:25 ("Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean") and John 3:5 ("born of water and the Spirit"), establishing that the new covenant cleansing promised by the prophets and the new birth announced by Christ are accomplished by the same Spirit in the same act.
Renewing of the Holy Spirit	Anakainōseōs pneumatōs hagiou, the second of the two parallel phrases in Titus 3:5. Anakainōsis (renewal, making-new) describes the Spirit's positive creative work in regeneration: not merely cleansing what was defiled but creating what was not there. The Spirit creates a new spiritual nature in the soul, new desires, new capacity for spiritual perception, new love for God and His Word. The "renewing" of Titus 3:5 corresponds to the "new heart" and "new spirit" of Ezekiel 36:26 and to the "new creation" of 2 Corinthians 5:17.
Logical Priority	A relationship of theological precedence in which one event is the cause or ground of another, without necessarily implying temporal precedence. The Reformed doctrine that regeneration has logical priority over faith means that the new birth is the cause of faith, the Spirit must first create spiritual life before that life can exercise the spiritual act of faith, not that there is a detectable gap in time between regeneration and faith. In the believer's experience, regeneration and faith may be simultaneous moments in a single conversion event; theologically, regeneration is the cause and faith is the effect.
Concursive Operation	The theological description of the Spirit's work in regeneration as operating through rather than apart from the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word work concurrently and inseparably in the new birth: the Word provides the specific gospel content through which the Spirit works (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18), while the Spirit provides the life-giving power through which the Word becomes effective (2 Corinthians 3:6). Neither the Word alone (which can describe life without imparting it) nor the Spirit alone (which ordinarily does not bypass the specific instrument of the gospel) produces regeneration apart from the other.
Tests of Regeneration	The evidences of new birth presented in 1 John: the practice of righteousness (2:29), the inability to make sin a habitual lifestyle (3:9), love for the brethren (4:7), saving faith in Jesus as the Christ (5:1), and faith that overcomes the world (5:4). These tests are not the conditions that produce regeneration but the fruits that regeneration produces, they function as confirmatory evidence for assurance rather than as earning mechanisms. The person who genuinely and habitually exhibits these evidences has scriptural warrant for confidence in his regeneration; the person who habitually lacks them has scriptural warrant for urgent self-examination.

Term	Definition
New Creation	The Pauline designation for the regenerate person in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature (kainē ktisis, new creation); the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” The new creation language places individual regeneration within the cosmic framework of God’s eschatological renewal of all things: the regenerate person is a preview and a first installment of the new creation that will be fully realized at Christ’s return. The Spirit who regenerates the individual is the same Spirit whose eschatological power will renew the cosmos. Regeneration is the down payment of cosmic renewal.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that regeneration is entirely the Spirit's sovereign work, not in partnership with human initiative, not as God's response to human faith, but as the creative, life-giving act of the Spirit that precedes and produces faith. This conviction has a critical implication for how we understand our own conversion: we did not regenerate ourselves by deciding to believe; the Spirit regenerated us so that we could and would believe. The faith we exercised was the first living breath of the new nature the Spirit had just created in us. Believing correctly about this does not diminish the reality or the freedom of our faith; it locates the credit for our faith exactly where it belongs, in the sovereign grace of the Spirit who breathed life into us when we were dead.

We must also believe that the evidences of regeneration presented in 1 John are real and verifiable, not idealized descriptions of a perfection no one attains. John is not describing what a Christian's life will eventually look like at its most mature; he is describing what every genuinely regenerate person's life actually exhibits to some degree from the moment of new birth. The practice of righteousness, the inability to make sin the habitual pattern of life, the love for the brethren, and the saving faith in Christ are not the aspirations of an elite spiritual class; they are the ordinary, Spirit-created characteristics of every person who has been born of God. Use them for honest self-examination, not for perfectionist despair. They are diagnostic tools, not judgments.

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

Let the doctrine of regeneration produce in you a specific gratitude for the miracle of your new birth. You were spiritually dead. You could not see the kingdom of God. You could not come to Christ. You could not exercise saving faith. And then the Spirit of God breathed. He did not ask your cooperation, because you were not in a condition to cooperate. He did not wait for your initiative, because you were not in a condition to take initiative. He breathed where He willed, as the wind blows where it wills, and your spiritual deadness gave way to spiritual life. The faith you now exercise, the love you now feel, the repentance you now practice, the Word you now cherish, all of this is the fruit of a single sovereign pneumatological act by which the Third Person of the Holy Trinity made you alive when you were dead. The appropriate response is the astonished, humbled, grateful worship of someone who has been raised from the dead.

Desire to examine your life regularly against the 1 John evidences of regeneration, not with the anxious self-scrutiny of a person who fears condemnation, but with the honest, hopeful self-examination of a person who wants to see the Spirit's evidence of new birth in his own life and who knows that where there is genuine evidence, there is genuine assurance. If you find the evidences weak or absent in a particular area, bring that area to the Spirit in repentance and prayer, asking Him to cultivate in you what He planted in regeneration. The Spirit who

regenerated you is the Spirit who sanctifies you; the new nature He created in the new birth is the nature He is cultivating and conforming to Christ through the whole Christian life.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read 1 John carefully, ideally in a single sitting, and identify every verse that uses the language of being “born of God” or being “born of the Spirit.” List the evidences of regeneration that John presents in each context. Then, taking John’s evidences as the lens, honestly examine your own life: Where do you see the marks of new birth most clearly? Where do you see them least clearly? What does the pattern of evidence reveal about the Spirit’s work in your life, and where do you most need His ongoing cultivating work?
- Read John 3:1–8 slowly and meditatively, attending to Nicodemus’s position in the narrative: he is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel, everything that human religious achievement could produce. And Jesus tells him that none of it can see or enter the kingdom without the new birth. Where in your own life do you trust in the equivalent of Nicodemus’s credentials, religious background, theological education, church membership, moral attainment, rather than in the new birth itself as the ground of your standing with God? What does it mean that Jesus told the most religiously accomplished person in the conversation that he needed to be born again?
- Memorize Titus 3:5: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” Meditate on the verse’s structure: what God excluded (works of righteousness), what God did (washed, renewed), and how He did it (through the Spirit poured out through Christ). Let the memorization of this verse be an ongoing reminder that your new birth is not your achievement but God’s mercy.
- Examine your evangelism practice in the light of the doctrine of regeneration. Do you rely primarily on the power of your presentation, the emotional appeal of your delivery, or the logical force of your arguments, or do you rely primarily on the Spirit’s sovereign regenerating work through the instrument of the gospel Word? What would it look like for your evangelism to be marked by the confidence that only the Spirit can produce the new birth, and by the urgency that comes from knowing that He produces it through the Word you proclaim? How does prayer for the Spirit’s regenerating work fit into your evangelism practice?
- Spend time in specific prayer for two or three people in your life who show no evidence of regeneration. Pray for them not with the vague hope that they might “make a decision” but with the specific, scripturally grounded petition that the Spirit would breathe new life into their spiritually dead souls, that He would hover over their spiritual formlessness as He hovered over the primordial void (Genesis 1:2), that He would breathe the breath of life into their spiritual deadness as He breathed into Adam’s clay (Genesis 2:7), and that the word of truth you have sown or will sow would be the instrument through which He brings them forth to new life (James 1:18). Pray this with

faith, knowing that the sovereign Spirit who regenerated you can regenerate anyone He chooses to breathe upon.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. When you became a Christian, which of the following most accurately describes your understanding of what happened: (a) I decided to believe and God gave me new life in response; (b) God gave me new life and that new life expressed itself in my decision to believe; (c) I'm not sure there was any distinction, it seemed like one thing. Having studied this lesson, how would you now describe the relationship between the Spirit's regenerating work and your exercise of faith? Does clarifying the logical sequence change anything about the way you understand your conversion?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read John 3:1–8 carefully. Verse 3 says “unless one is born again (anōthen) he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Verse 5 says “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Note that verse 3 uses “see” and verse 5 uses “enter.” What is the significance of the progression from “see” to “enter”? What does it mean that the unregenerate person cannot even “see” (perceive, understand) the kingdom, not merely that he cannot enter it? How does this shape your understanding of the spiritual condition of the unregenerate person?
3. Read John 3:5–6 and 1 Peter 1:23 together. John 3:5 speaks of being “born of water and the Spirit” and 1 Peter 1:23 speaks of being “born again... through the living and enduring word of God.” What is the relationship between the Spirit and the Word in these two regeneration texts? Are they describing different instruments, or the same instrument from different angles? How does the concursive relationship between Word and Spirit in regeneration affect the way you think about the role of preaching and teaching in the life of the church?
4. Read Titus 3:3–7. Identify the contrast Paul draws between the before (v. 3) and the after (vv. 4–7). What is the “before” condition? What produced the change? Note that Paul says God saved us “not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness” (v. 5). What does this exclusion cover, only formal religious works, or also the act of believing or deciding? How does the positive description of the change (“washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit”) relate to the Trinitarian structure of verse 6 (Spirit poured out through Jesus Christ)?
5. Read 1 John 5:1: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” The lesson argues that the Greek grammar is exegetically decisive: the present participle (believes) follows the perfect passive (has been born), indicating that regeneration precedes and produces believing. Do you find this grammatical argument persuasive? Can you identify

other ways this verse could be read? What difference does it make for understanding the verse whether regeneration precedes faith or faith precedes regeneration?

6. Read 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4 and identify the specific evidence of regeneration presented in each verse. Create a list: (a) 2:29; (b) 3:9; (c) 4:7; (d) 5:1; (e) 5:4. How do these evidences relate to one another, are they independent tests, or do they form a coherent picture of what the new nature created in regeneration looks like? And note: each is an evidence of what regeneration produces, not a condition for receiving regeneration. How does the distinction between evidence and condition affect the way you use these tests for self-examination?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that regeneration has logical priority over faith: the Spirit must first create spiritual life before that life can exercise spiritual faith. The evangelical majority position reverses this: faith precedes and conditions regeneration. The lesson presents three lines of scriptural evidence for the Reformed position (John 6:44–65; 1 John 5:1’s grammar; Ephesians 2:1–5). Which of these three do you find most exegetically compelling? What is the strongest argument the other side would make against your preferred piece of evidence?
8. The lesson argues that 1 John 3:9 (“None who is born of God practices sin”) does not mean that the regenerate person never sins (cf. 1:8–2:2) but that sin is not his habitual, characterizing lifestyle orientation. Is this distinction between “occasional sin” and “practiced sin” exegetically warranted by the Greek present tense (*pouin hamartian*)? What pastoral use can be made of this distinction, both to warn the person who lives in habitual, unrepentant sin that his regeneration is in question, and to comfort the person who struggles with sin but does not live in it?
9. The wind analogy of John 3:8 presents regeneration as sovereign and mysterious: the Spirit “blows where it wishes” and the effects are evident even when the origin and direction are not. What pastoral implications flow from this image for the way we think about conversion experiences? Is it problematic that some people can identify a specific moment of conversion while others cannot pinpoint when their new birth occurred? How does the wind analogy address both types of experience?
10. The lesson argues that the concursive relationship between Word and Spirit in regeneration means that “the church that is careless about the proclamation of the Word is careless about the primary instrument of the Spirit’s regenerating work.” How does this claim engage the contemporary evangelical tendency to supplement or replace biblical preaching with music, experience, or entertainment as the primary medium of church communication? What does the theology of regeneration say to this tendency?
11. The lesson identifies three pastoral implications of regeneration: assurance (grounded in the evidence of new birth rather than the intensity of conversion experience),

sanctification (the progressive living-out of the new nature), and evangelism (proclamation-dependent, Spirit-trusting witness). Which of these three do you think is most neglected in contemporary evangelical church life? What would need to change for that particular implication to be more fully realized?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes reading 1 John with a pneumatological lens and then examining your own life against the evidences of regeneration. Having done this (or as you do it after the session), identify: (1) the evidence you find most clearly present in your life; (2) the evidence you find most uncertain or absent. For the uncertain or absent evidence, what specific prayer and what specific practice would help you address it?
13. Nicodemus was the most religiously accomplished person in the conversation with Jesus, and Jesus told him he needed to be born again. The lesson asks: where do you trust in the equivalent of Nicodemus's credentials rather than in the new birth itself? Be specific. What credentials, theological knowledge, church involvement, moral record, ministry service, family heritage, do you find yourself relying on for your sense of spiritual standing?
14. The lesson argues that regeneration-informed evangelism will be proclamation-dependent rather than technique-dependent, relying on the Word as the Spirit's instrument rather than on emotional manipulation or rhetorical sophistication. Evaluate your own evangelism practice or the evangelism culture of your church: how much does it rely on the power of the presentation vs. the power of the proclaimed Word? What would it take to shift the center of gravity from technique to proclamation?
15. The lesson closes with the invitation to pray specifically for the Spirit's regenerating work in the lives of two or three specific unconverted people. Name them. Pray for them now, using the specific language of regeneration: not that they would "make a decision" but that the Spirit would breathe new life into their spiritually dead souls through the instrument of the gospel Word. How does praying in this specific, pneumatologically grounded way change the character of your intercession for the unconverted?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with a corporate reading of Ezekiel 37:1–14, the great vision of the valley of dry bones, which the series has used repeatedly as the Old Testament’s most vivid image of the Spirit’s life-giving work. Read it as a pneumatological parable of regeneration: the valley of dry bones is the human race in its spiritual death; the bones assembled and covered with flesh is the form of religion without spiritual life; the breath of God entering the bodies and bringing them to life is regeneration; the promise “I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life” (v. 14) is the New Covenant’s promise of universal regeneration fulfilled through the gospel. After reading, pause and let the image settle: this is what you were before the Spirit breathed upon you. And this is what happened when He did.

Begin the prayer with an extended act of corporate adoration for the Spirit’s regenerating work. Not for conversion experiences or for emotional memories of a specific moment of decision, but for the objective pneumatological act that underlies every conversion experience: the Spirit’s sovereign, instantaneous, creative new birth that the Nicodemus conversation requires, that the John 3:8 wind announces, that the Titus 3:5 washing and renewing describes, and that 1 John’s evidences attest. Thank the Spirit that He blew where He willed over the spiritual deadness of your soul and brought new life into existence where none had been. Thank the Father that He did this not on the basis of any righteousness of yours but according to His own mercy. Thank the Son through whom the Spirit was poured out richly upon you as on all who are His.

Pray through the three pastoral implications identified in this lesson. First, for assurance: pray for those in the community who struggle with the question of whether their regeneration is genuine. Ask the Spirit to produce in each person’s life the evidences of 1 John so clearly and so convincingly that doubt is displaced by Spirit-grounded confidence. Not the confidence of religious achievement or emotional certainty, but the quiet, settled, Spirit-evidenced confidence of one who practices righteousness, loves the brethren, clings to Christ by faith, and finds that faith overcoming the world’s claim on them. Second, for sanctification: pray for the ongoing cultivation of the new nature that the Spirit planted in regeneration, specifically, for the areas in which each person finds the evidences of new birth most uncertain or weak. Third, for evangelism: pray for the unconverted people named by the participants, asking the Spirit to breathe new life into their spiritual deadness through the instrument of the gospel Word.

Close with the affirmation of John 3:8 as a doxological declaration: “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.” The mystery of the Spirit’s regenerating work is not an embarrassment but a doxology: we cannot control it, predict it, or produce it, because it belongs to the sovereign freedom of the God whose ways are unsearchable and whose gifts are irrevocable. Let the community close in gratitude and wonder that the Spirit whose ways no one can predict breathed upon them, and they live.

*“Unless one is born again
he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
“That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
The wind blows where it wishes...
so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*
John 3:3, 6, 8, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 3:1–8; John 1:12–13; 1 Peter 1:23; Titus 3:3–7; James 1:18; Ezekiel 36:25–27; 37:1–14;
1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1–9; 2 Corinthians 3:6

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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