

Regeneration

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IN taking up this series of addresses on some of the great words of the gospel, I shall be thinking particularly of babes in Christ, that is, those who only recently have been brought, through the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit, to a saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus. Babes need to be fed. The apostle Peter says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." "Strong meat," we are told elsewhere, "belongeth to those who are of full age." That is, the deeper truths of the Word of God are for Christians who have had years of experience in the ways of the Lord. It is not of such that I am now thinking, but of those who only a little while ago were still in nature's darkness, but have been awakened and saved, and are now, I trust, hungry to learn more of the precious truths of the Word of God.

First of all, I want to talk to you about regeneration. My text is found in Titus 3, verses 3 to 7:

For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

In this passage we see what we once were, before we were converted. Verse 3 describes the lives we then lived. Verse 4 tells of the marvelous way in which God our Saviour has intervened. He has revealed Himself to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have been justified and made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Verse 5 tells us of the work that takes place within every converted soul. Altogether apart from human effort, God has saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

It is the word "regeneration" upon which I want you to fix your attention. This word is found only twice in our English Bible, and the original word thus translated is never found anywhere else but in these two instances—here and in Matthew 19, verse 28, where we read: "Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The word "regeneration" means a second birth or a new creation. In Matthew, the Lord was

speaking of the earth's new birth, when the present distressing circumstances will pass away and new conditions will prevail, at the coming of the Son of man to reign in righteousness over all this lower creation. That will be the time when men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks, and the nations shall learn war no more. Then every man will dwell in peace under his own vine and fig tree. It will be the time when Messiah will be King over all the earth, and rule the nations with the inflexible iron rod of righteousness. That will indeed be earth's regeneration, a new creation, a new condition of things for this poor world.

But in the Epistle to Titus, the only other place where we have the word "regeneration" in the Bible, the reference is to the work that takes place in an individual when he is born again through believing the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Look again at verse 3, where the apostle speaks of our past condition, we who are now regenerate. In those days we were deluded by the devil. Our hearts were filled with unholy desires. We gave ourselves to many things that were displeasing to God and hurtful to ourselves. "We were sometimes foolish," says the apostle. In spite of the fact that we are now regenerate, we are sometimes foolish still. How easily we give way to temptations! How readily we allow ourselves to come under the power of worldly things! But characteristically, the days of our folly ended when we came to Christ. Before that, we were indeed foolish. We were wickedly disobedient, following our own natural, fleshly desires, living unabashed in our sinful ways, dishonoring God's holy name. Many of the evil things to which we gave ourselves obtained power over us because of Satan's deception. He, the arch deceiver, had taken us captive at his will. In those days of our deception, when we thought of the Christian life, it seemed to us anything but desirable. We imagined that Christians must necessarily live very gloomy, unhappy lives, and that the only people who thoroughly enjoyed life were those who lived for the world and its follies.

But now all this is changed. We have been brought to know Christ. This is true of many of you. You heard the voice of God calling you to repentance; you turned to Him, confessing your sin; you trusted the Lord Jesus Christ; you believed the gospel, and you have now become His children through "the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."

In the account of our Lord's interview with Nicodemus, as related in the third chapter of John, we are told how he startled the Jewish doctor of the law by declaring that he must be born again, born of water and of the Spirit. Do not make the mistake of supposing that "born of water" means baptismal regeneration. There is no such thing taught in the Word of God. Water, throughout all of John's writings particularly, and also in many other parts of the Bible, is the recognized symbol of

the Word of God, and this passage in Titus makes it perfectly clear. The new birth is by the Word and the Spirit. This is the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

In John 4, we find the Lord speaking to a poor, sinful woman at the well of Sychar. She was outside the pale of respectability. He knew all about her, about all her failures, but His heart went out to her, and He desired to make of that woman a new creature. He did not talk to her in the same way as He did to Nicodemus. He spoke to her of the unsatisfactory character of all that this world has to offer, and in contrast with that He presented the preciousness of eternal life, and He told her that eternal life would be hers when she received the water that He would give. You remember His words: "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

Now, whatever water means here, it means exactly the same in chapter 3, for here we are told that eternal life is received when we drink of the water that Jesus gives, and in John 3 we are said to be born of water and of the Spirit. To be born again and to receive eternal life are really one and the same thing. When we were born naturally, we received natural life; when we were born from above, we received spiritual or eternal life.

The figure that Jesus used is not a new one. That is why Nicodemus should have understood better than he did. In Psalm 119, verse 9, David says, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word." Jeremiah chided the people of Israel in the name of the Lord, saying, "They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." Ezekiel tells how God will sprinkle clean water upon those who turn to Him, cleansing them from all their idolatry and their filthiness, and He will take away their stony hearts and give them hearts of flesh. This is what He does when people are born again.

Farther on in this Gospel, the Lord Jesus says, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." He offers the living waters to all who will receive it. In the book of the Revelation we read, "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." The water of life is the glorious gospel message that comes down from the throne of God and flows out into the deserts of this world, bringing life and healing wherever it goes. In the book of Proverbs we read, "As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country." That is exactly what the gospel is. The very word means good news, the good news that Christ Jesus came down from heaven to save all poor sinners who will put their trust in Him. This is the living water. Receive it, take it into your heart, and you will be born of water and of the Spirit.

And with this agree the words of the apostle James. He says in James, chapter one and verse 18, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." How are we begotten? By the Word, the Word of truth. Then the apostle Peter tells us the same thing. He says, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (I Peter 1:23-25). There it is. James says we are begotten of the Word; Peter says we are born again by the Word of God which liveth and abideth forever. And so, believing the Word, we receive the living Word. It is the Word that the Spirit of God uses in order to produce the new life.

When we are born again, we are cleansed from our old sins, so the thought of washing is also connected with the Word. Think again of the passage I quoted from the one hundred and nineteenth Psalm: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word." As we walk in obedience to the Word of God we are kept clean and free from the defiling things of this world. This, too, is what Ezekiel emphasized in chapter 36, verses 25 to 27:

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

This should all have been clear to Nicodemus, but he failed to understand it. Then in Ephesians, chapter five and verses 25,26, we read:

Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.

So it is by the Word that we are born again and by the Word we are washed. The old things that were once so dishonoring to God are washed out of our lives when we trust in Christ. We should never again be characterized by our former habits and behavior.

Do not forget that new birth is something more than just accepting certain doctrines. It is receiving Christ and believing the gospel, as a result of which we are created anew in Christ Jesus, and we receive eternal life with all its new and godlike desires. God expects of you who have trusted Christ something different from what was found in

your lives in the old days before you were saved. Old habits should disappear, and they will if you let the Spirit of God have His way in your life. Do not be discouraged because you find you do not become perfect immediately. No Christian is perfect, but we are all going on to perfection. Those of us who have been converted many years have to say with Paul, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." When you are converted, the Holy Spirit of God begins His work of renewal, and it goes on all through life—the renewing of the mind. The Spirit of God uses the Word, as we meditate upon it, so that our hearts' desires are changed, and more and more we come to understand His will. As we walk in obedience to that will, we grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We may see from this how important it is that we daily study the Word of God and spend time before Him in prayer, looking to Him to open up His truth and apply it to our own hearts and consciences. If we are consistent and persistent in thus seeking to know the mind of the Lord, our lives will be transformed as the Holy Spirit works in and through us, giving the Word as we need it for our food, and using it too as water for the cleansing of our ways.

Before the blessed Lord went home to heaven, He promised that the Holy Spirit would come to carry on the work that He had begun, and when He took His place at the right hand of the Father, as Peter says, "He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." He was referring to the Holy Spirit, who was acting in such mighty power on the day of Pentecost. He is the blessed Comforter who has now come to indwell each believer, and as we yield ourselves to His guidance, we are enabled to live lives of victory and to enjoy fellowship with our Father in heaven.

Do not be content, dear young convert, in days to come, just to look back and say, "So many years ago on such and such an occasion I was born again." Do not be forever thinking of that happy day when Jesus washed your sins away. It is all right to sing that beautiful hymn. I love to sing it, too, but I do not want to have to look back to all my happy days. Every day ought to be a happy day, and will be if we go on in fellowship with God. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." As you let the Spirit of God have His way in your life you will be conscious of the renewing of the Holy Ghost, changing your affections and desires, fixing your mind and heart on things above.