

The Necessity Of Regeneration

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A. The need for regeneration lies in our natural degeneration. In consequence of the fall of our first parents, all of us were born alienated from the divine life and holiness, despoiled of all those perfections with which man's nature was at first endowed. Ezekiel 16:4-5 gives a graphic picture of our terrible spiritual plight at our entrance into this world: cast out to the loathing of our persons, rolling ourselves in our own filth, impotent to help ourselves. That "likeness" of God (Gen. 1:26) which was at first stamped on man's soul had been effaced, aversion from God and an inordinate love of the creature having displaced it. The very fountain of our being is polluted, continually sending forth bitter springs, and though those streams take several courses and wander in various channels, yet are they all brackish. Therefore the "sacrifice" of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 15:8), and his very plowing "sin" (Prov. 21:4).

There are but two states, and all men are included in them: the one a state of spiritual life, the other a state of spiritual death; the one a state of righteousness, the other a state of sin; the one saving, the other damning; the one a state of enmity, in which men have their inclinations contrary to God; the other a state of friendship and fellowship, in which men walk obediently unto God, and would not willingly have an inward motion opposed to His will. The one state is called darkness, the other light: "For you were [in your unregenerate days, not only in the dark, but] darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8). There is no medium between these conditions; all are in one of them. Each man and woman now on earth is either an object of God's delight or of His abomination. The most benevolent and imposing works of the flesh cannot please Him, but the faintest sparks proceeding from what grace has kindled are acceptable in His sight.

By the fall, man contracted an *unfitness* to what is good. Shaped in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5), man is a "transgressor from the womb" (Isa. 48:8): "they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3), and "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). He may be civilized, educated, refined, and even religious, but at heart he is "desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9), and all that he does is vile in the sight of God, for nothing is done from love toward Him, and with a view to His glory. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7:18). Until they are born again, all men are "reprobate² for every good work" (Titus 1:16).

By the fall, man contracted an *unwillingness* toward that which is good. All motions of the will in its fallen estate, through defect of a right principle from which they flow and a right end to which they tend, are only evil and sinful. Leave man to himself, remove from him all the restraints which law and order impose, and he swiftly degenerates to a lower level than the beasts, as almost any missionary will testify. And is human nature any better in civilized lands? Not a whit. Wash off the artificial veneer and it will be found that "as in water face answers to

¹ The language has been partially updated and formatted for readability – William H. Gross, Colorado Springs 2006

² That is, unfit.

face, so the heart of man to man” (Prov. 27:19). The world over it remains solemnly true that “the carnal mind is enmity³ against God: for it is not subject to the law of God nor indeed can it be” (Rom. 8:7). Christ will prefer the same charge in a coming day as when He was here on earth: “Men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3: 19). Men *will not* come to Him that they might have life.

By the Fall man contracted an *inability* to do what is good. He is not only unfitted and unwilling, but *unable* to do what is good. Where is the man that can truthfully say he has measured up to his own ideals? All have to acknowledge there is a strange force within dragging them downward; inclining them to evil, which, notwithstanding their utmost endeavors against it, in some form or other, more or less, conquers them. Despite the kindly exhortations of friends, the faithful warnings of God's servants, the solemn examples of suffering and sorrow, disease and death on every side, and the vote that their own conscience gives, yet they yield. “They that are in the flesh [in their natural condition] *cannot* please God” (Rom. 8:8).

Thus it is evident that the need is imperative for a radical and revolutionary change to be wrought in fallen man before he can have any fellowship with the thrice-holy God. Since the earth must be completely changed, because of the curse now resting on it, before it can ever again bring forth fruit as it did when man was in a state of innocency; so must man (since a general defilement from Adam has seized him) be renewed before he can “bring forth fruit to God” (Rom. 7:4). He must be grafted into another stock, united to Christ, partake of the power of His resurrection; without this he may bring forth fruit, but not unto God.

How can anyone turn to God without a principle of spiritual motion? How can he who has no spiritual life live to God? How can he who is of a brutish and diabolical nature be fit for the kingdom of God?

B. *The need for regeneration lies in man's total depravity.* Every member of Adam's race is a fallen creature, and every part of his complex being has been corrupted by sin. Man's heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). His mind is blinded by Satan (2Cor 4:4) and darkened by sin (Eph. 4:18), so that his thoughts are only evil continually (Gen. 6:5). His affections are prostituted, so that he loves what God hates and hates what God loves. His will is enslaved from good (Rom. 6:20) and opposed to God (Rom. 8:7). He is without righteousness (Rom. 3:10), under the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10) and is the captive of the devil. His condition is truly deplorable, and his case desperate. He cannot better himself, for he is “without strength” (Rom. 5:6). He cannot work out his salvation, for no good thing dwells in him (Rom. 7:18). He needs, then, to be born of God, “for in Christ Jesus circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision, but only a *new creation*” (Gal. 6:15).

Man is a fallen creature. It is not that a few leaves have faded, but that the entire tree has become rotten, root and branch. There is in every one, that which is radically wrong. The word *radical* comes from a Latin one which means “the root,” so that when we say a man is radically wrong, we mean that there is in him, in the very foundation and fiber of his being, what is intrinsically corrupt and essentially evil. Sins are merely the fruit; there must of necessity be a root from which they spring. It follows then, as an inevitable consequence, that man needs the aid of a

³ That is, at war.

Higher Power to effect a radical change in him. There is only One who can effect that change: God created man, and God alone can re-create him. Hence the imperative demand, “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Man is spiritually *dead* and nothing but almighty power can make him alive.

“By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men” (Rom. 5:12). In the day that Adam ate of the forbidden fruit, he died spiritually, and *a person who is spiritually dead cannot beget a child who possesses spiritual life*. Therefore, all by natural descent enter this world “alienated from the life of God” (Eph. 4:18), “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2: 1). This is no mere figure of speech, but a solemn fact. Every child is born entirely destitute of a single spark of spiritual life, and therefore, if it is ever to enter the kingdom of God, which is the realm of spiritual life (Rom. 14:17), it must be *born* into it.

The more clearly we are enabled to discern the imperative *need* of regeneration and the various reasons *why* it is absolutely essential in order for a fallen creature to be fitted for the presence of the thrice holy God, the less difficulty are we likely to encounter when we endeavor to arrive at an understanding of the *nature* of regeneration, *what* it is which takes place within a person when the Holy Spirit renews him. For this reason particularly, and also because such a cloud of error has been cast upon this vital truth, we feel that further study needs to be devoted to this particular aspect of our subject.

Jesus Christ came into this world to glorify God and to glorify Himself by redeeming a people for Himself. But what glory can we conceive that God has, and what glory would accrue to Christ, if there is not a vital and fundamental difference between His people and the world? And what difference can there be between those two companies but in a *change of heart*, out of which [flow] the issues of life (Prov. 4:23): a change of nature or disposition, as the fountain from which all other differences must proceed — sheep and goats differ in nature. The whole mediatorial work of Christ has this one end in view. His priestly office is to reconcile and bring His people to God; His prophetic, to teach them the way; His kingly, to work in them those qualifications and bestow upon them that quality which is necessary to fit them for holy converse and communion with the thrice-holy God. Thus He “purifies for himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14).

“Don’t you know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived” (1Cor. 6:9). But multitudes *are* deceived, and deceived at this very point, and on this most momentous matter. God has warned men that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9), but few will believe that this is true of *them*. Instead, tens of thousands of professing Christians are filled with a vain and presumptuous confidence that all is well with them. They delude themselves with hopes of mercy while continuing to live in a course of self-will and self-pleasing. They fancy they are fitted for heaven, while every day that passes finds them the more prepared for hell. It is written of the Lord Jesus that “He shall save his people *from* their sins” (Matt. 1:21), not *in* their sins; save them not only from the penalty, but also from the power and pollution of sin.

To how many in Christendom do these solemn words apply: “For he flatters himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity is found to be hateful” (Ps. 36:2). The principal device of Satan is to

deceive people into imagining that they can successfully combine the world with God, allow the flesh while pretending to the Spirit, and thus “make the best of both worlds.” But Christ has emphatically declared that “no man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). Many mistake the real force of those searching words: the true emphasis is not upon “two,” but upon “serve” — none can *serve* two masters. And God requires to be “served” — feared, submitted to, obeyed; *His* will regulating the life in all its details (see 1Sam. 12:24-25). “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him *only* shall you *serve*” (Matt. 4:10).

C. *The need for regeneration lies in man's unsuitedness to God.* When Nicodemus, a respectable and religious Pharisee, indeed, a “master in Israel,” came to Christ, He told him plainly that “unless a man is born again” he could neither see nor enter the “kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5) — either the gospel-state on earth or the glory-state in heaven. None can enter the spiritual realm unless he has a spiritual nature, which alone gives him an aptitude for and capacity to enjoy the things pertaining to it; and this, the natural man does not have. So far from it, he cannot so much as “discern” them (1Cor. 2:14). He has no love for them, nor desire after them (John 3:19). Nor can he desire them, for his will is enslaved by the lusts of the flesh (Eph. 2:2-3). Therefore, before a man can enter the spiritual kingdom, his understanding must be supernaturally enlightened, his heart renewed, and his will emancipated.

There can be no point of contact between God and His Christ with a sinful man until he is regenerated. There can be no lawful union between two parties who have nothing vital in common. A superior and an inferior nature may be united together, but never contrary natures. Can fire and water be united, a beast and a man, a good angel and a vile devil? Can heaven and hell ever meet on friendly terms? In all friendship there must be a similarity of disposition; before there can be communion there must be some agreement or oneness. Beasts and men do not agree in a life of reason, and therefore cannot converse together. God and men do not agree in a life of holiness, and therefore can have no communion together (*condensed from S. Charnock*).

We are united to the “first Adam” by a likeness of nature; how then can we be united to the “last Adam” without a likeness to Him from a new nature or principle? We are united to the first Adam by a living soul; we must be united to the last Adam by a quickening Spirit. We have nothing to do with the heavenly Adam without bearing a heavenly image (1Cor. 15:48-49). If we are *His* members, we must have the same nature which was communicated to Him, the Head, by the Spirit of God, which is *holiness* (Luke 1:35). There must be one “spirit” in both: thus it is written, “he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit” (1Cor. 6:17). And again God tells us, “If any man does not have the Spirit of Christ he is none of his” (Rom. 8:9). Nor can anything be vitally united to another without life. A living head and a dead body is inconceivable.

There can be no communion with God without a renewed soul. God is incapable on His part, with honor to His Law and holiness, to have fellowship with such a creature as fallen man. Man is incapable on his part, because of the aversion rooted in his fallen nature. Then how is it possible for God and man to be brought together without the latter experiencing a thorough change of nature? What communion can there be between Light and darkness, between the living God and a dead heart? “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). God loathes sin, man loves it; God loves holiness, man loathes it. How then could such contrary

affections meet together in an amicable friendship? Sin has alienated us from the life of God (Eph. 4:18), and therefore from His fellowship; life, then, must be restored to us before we can be instated in communion with Him. Old things must pass away, and all things become new (2Cor. 5:17).

Gospel-duties cannot be performed without regeneration. The first requirement of Christ from His followers is that they shall *deny self*. But that is impossible to fallen human nature, for men are “lovers of their own selves” (2Tim. 3:2). Not until the soul is renewed will self be repudiated. Therefore, the new-covenant promise is, “I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 11:19). All gospel-duties require a pliability and tenderness of heart. Pride was the condemnation of the devil (1Tim. 3:6), and our first parents fell through swelling designs to be like God (Gen. 3:5). Ever since then, man has been too aspiring and too well opinionated of himself to perform duties in an evangelical strain, with that nothingness-in-himself which the gospel requires. The chief design of the gospel is to beat down all glorying in ourselves, that we should glory only in the Lord (1Cor. 1:29-31); but this is not possible till grace renews the heart, melts it before God, and molds it to His requirements.

Without a new nature we cannot perform gospel-duties *constantly*. “Those who are after the flesh mind the things of the flesh” (Rom. 8:5). Such a mind cannot long be employed upon spiritual things. Prickings of conscience, terrors of hell, fears of death, may exert a temporary influence, but they do not last. Stony ground may bring forth blades, yet for lack of root, they quickly wither away (Matt. 13). A stone may be flung high into the air, but ultimately it falls back to the earth; so the natural man may for a time mount high in religious fervor, but sooner or later it shall be said of him, as it was of Israel, “Their *heart* was not right with him, neither were they *steadfast* in his covenant” (Ps. 78:37). Many seem to begin in the Spirit, but end in the flesh. Only where *God* has wrought in the soul, will the work last forever (Eccles. 3:14; Phil. 1:6).

As regeneration is indispensably necessary to a gospel-state, so it is to a state of heavenly glory.

“It seems to be typified by the strength and freshness of the Israelites when they entered into Canaan. Not one decrepit and infirm person set foot in the promised land: none of those that came out of Egypt with an Egyptian nature, and desires for its garlic and onions, suffering from their old bondage, but [all] dropped their carcasses in the wilderness [except] the two spies who had encouraged them against the seeming difficulties. None that retain only the old man, born in the house of bondage, shall enter into the heavenly Canaan, but only a new regenerate creature. Heaven is the inheritance of the sanctified, not of the filthy: ‘that they may receive an inheritance among them which are sanctified through faith that is in me’ (Acts 26:18). Upon Adam's expulsion from paradise, a flaming sword was set to stop his reentering into that place of happiness. As Adam, in his forlorn state, could not possess it, we also, by what we have received from Adam, cannot expect a greater privilege than our root. The priest under the law could not enter into the sanctuary till he was purified, nor the people into the congregation: neither can any man have access into the Holiest till he is sprinkled by the blood of Jesus: Heb. 10:22” (S. Charnock).

Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. Said Christ, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). For whom? For those who have, in heart, “forsaken all” to follow Him (Matt.

19:27). For those who love God (1Cor. 2:9); and those who love God, love the things of God: they perceive the inestimable value and beauty of spiritual things. And they, who really love spiritual things, deem no sacrifice too great to win them (Phil. 3:8). But in order to love spiritual things, the man himself must be made spiritual. The natural man may hear about them and have a correct idea of the doctrine of them, but he does not receive them spiritually in the *love* of them (2Thess. 2:10), and he does not find his joy and happiness in them. But the renewed soul longs after them, not by constraint, but because God has won his heart. His confession is, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside you" (Ps. 73:25). God has become his chief good, His will is his only rule, His glory his chief end. In such a one, the very inclinations of the soul have been changed.

The man himself must be changed before he is prepared for heaven, Of the regenerate it is written, "giving thanks to the Father, which has *made us fit* to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col. 1:12). None are "made fit" while they are unholy, for it is an inheritance of the *saints*; none are fitted for it while they are under the power of darkness, for it is an inheritance *in light*. Christ Himself did not ascend to heaven to take possession of His glory till after His resurrection from the dead; nor can we enter heaven unless we have been resurrected from sin. "He that has wrought [polished] us *for* the selfsame thing (to be clothed with our heavenly house) is God," and the proof that He has done this is giving us "the earnest of the Spirit" (2Cor. 5:5); and where the Spirit of the Lord is "there is *liberty*" (2Cor. 3:17), liberty from the power of indwelling sin, as the verse which follows clearly shows.

"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). To "see" God is to be introduced into the most intimate intercourse with Him. It is to have that "thick cloud" of our transgressions blotted out (Isa. 44:22), for it was our iniquities that separated us from our God (Isa. 58:2). To "see" God, here has the force of *enjoy*, as in John 3:36.

But for this enjoyment a "pure heart" is indispensable. Now the heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9), for faith has to do with God. Thus, a "pure" heart is one that has been cleansed from sin and has a holy Object before it. A "pure" heart is one that has its affections set upon things above, being attracted by "the beauty of holiness." But how could he enjoy *God* who cannot now endure the imperfect holiness of His children, but rails against it as unnecessary "strictness" or puritanic fanaticism? God's face is only to be beheld in righteousness (Ps. 17:15).

"Follow peace with all and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). None can dwell with God and be eternally happy in His presence unless a radical change has been wrought in him, a change from sin to holiness. This change *must* be, like that introduced by the Fall, one which reaches to the very roots of our beings, affecting the entire man: removing the darkness of our minds, awakening and then pacifying the conscience, spiritualizing our affections, converting the will, reforming our whole life. And this great change must take place here on earth. The removal of the soul to heaven is no substitute for regeneration. It is not the *place* which conveys likeness to God. When the angels fell, they were in heaven, but the glory of God's dwelling place did not restore them. Satan entered heaven (Job 2:1), but he left it again unchanged. There must be a likeness to God wrought in the soul by the Spirit before it is fitted to enjoy heaven.

“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (I Cor. 15:50). If the body must be changed before it can enter heaven, how much more so the soul, for “there shall in no way enter into it anything that defiles” (Rev. 21:27). And *what is* the supreme glory of heaven? Is it freedom from toil and worry, sickness and sorrow, suffering and death? No! It is that heaven is the place where there is the full manifestation of Him who is “glorious in holiness” — that holiness which the wicked, while presumptuously hoping to go to heaven, despise and hate here on earth. The inhabitants of heaven are given a clear sight of the ineffable purity of God and are granted the most intimate communion with Him. But none are fitted for this unless their inner beings (as well as outer lives) have undergone a radical, revolutionizing, supernatural change.

Can it be thought that Christ will prepare mansions of glory for those who refuse to receive Him into their hearts and give Him the first place in their lives down here? No, indeed; rather He will laugh at their calamity and mock when their fear comes (Prov. 1:26). The instrument of the heart must be tuned here on earth to fit it to produce the melody of praise in heaven. God has so linked together holiness and happiness (as He has sin and wretchedness) that they cannot be separated. Were it possible for an unregenerate soul to enter heaven, it would find there no sanctuary from the lashings of conscience and the tormenting fire of God's holiness. Many suppose that nothing but the *merits* of Christ are needed to qualify them for heaven. But this is a great mistake. None receive remission of sins through the blood of Christ who are not first “turned from the power of Satan unto God” (Acts 26:18). God subdues the iniquities of those whose sins He casts into the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19). Pardoning sins and purifying the heart are as inseparable as the blood *and* water which flowed from the Savior's side (John 19:34).

Being renewed in the spirit of our mind, and putting on the new man “which is created after God in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:23-24) is as indispensable to a *fitness* for heaven, as having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us is for a *title* to it. “A malefactor, by pardon, has a *capacity* to come into the presence of a prince and serve him at his table, but he is not *fit* till his noisome garments, full of vermin are taken off” (S. Charnock). It is both a fatal delusion and a wicked presumption for one who is living to please self to imagine that *his* sins have been forgiven by God. It is the “washing of regeneration” which gives evidence of our being justified by grace (Titus 3:5-7). When Christ saves, He *indwells* (Gal. 2:20), and it is impossible for Him to reside in a heart which yet remains spiritually cold, hard, and lifeless. The supreme Pattern of holiness cannot be a Patron of licentiousness.

Justification and sanctification are inseparable: where one is absolved from the guilt of sin, he is also delivered from the dominion of sin, but neither the one nor the other can be until the soul is regenerated. Just as Christ's being made in the likeness of sin's flesh was indispensable for God to impute to Him His people's sins (Rom. 8:3), so it is equally necessary for us to be made new creatures in Christ (2Cor. 5:17) before we can legally be made the righteousness of God in Him (2Cor. 5:21). The need to be made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) is as real and as great as Christ's taking part in human nature before He could save us (Heb. 2:14-17). “Unless God was born as a man, He could not come into the kingdom of sin. Unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of righteousness. And divine power — the power of the Holy Spirit, the plenipotentiary and executant of all the will of the Godhead — achieves [both] the incarnation of God and the regeneration of man, so that the Son of God may be made sin, and the sons of men may be made righteous” (H. Martin).

How could one possibly enter a world of ineffable holiness who has spent all of his time in sin, i.e., pleasing *self*? How could he possibly sing the song of the Lamb if his *heart* has never been tuned to it? How could he endure to behold the awful majesty of God *face to face*, who never before so much as saw Him “through a glass darkly” by the eye of faith? As it is excruciating torture for eyes that have been long confined to dismal darkness, to suddenly gaze upon the bright beams of the midday sun, so will it be when the unregenerate behold Him who is Light. Instead of welcoming such a sight, “*all* kindreds of the earth shall *wail* because of him” (Rev. 1:7); indeed, so overwhelming will be their anguish, that they will call to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:17).

And, my reader, *that* will be *your* experience, unless God regenerates you!