

A Portrait of Regeneration
Ezekiel 36:22-32

22 “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. **23** I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,” declares the Lord God, “when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. **24** For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. **25** Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. **26** Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **27** I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. **28** You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. **29** Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not [j]bring a famine on you. **30** I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, so that you will not receive again the disgrace of famine among the nations. **31** Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations. **32** I am not doing *this* for your sake,” declares the Lord God, “let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!”

When engaging in evangelism and apologetics, one learns that American Christians use a certain type or vernacular... a number of idioms that are indigenous to our faith. We use “church language”, if you will... and to outsiders, it often sounds as if we are speaking Greek. As such, I have learned to be careful in how I say things. For instance, I have learned not to ask people if they are “saved.” Here in Knoxville TN, most people say yes... yet after further questioning, I discover that they don’t understand what that means. As a result, I have I ask people if they have “been “born again.”

Why do you think that’s important? Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave the answer in John 3... you all know the story. A Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus came to Jesus and acknowledged that Jesus was sent by God. What was Jesus’s reply? He didn’t fall for such flatter... rather, he lay a truth bomb on Nicodemus. Jesus said “...**Truly, truly, 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.**” Now the process that Jesus was describing... being reborn... is known in theological circles as “regeneration.”

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says that “Regeneration, or new birth, is an inner re-creating of fallen human nature by the gracious sovereign action of the Holy Spirit.” Our primary text today comes from Ezekiel 36. If the saying is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, then today’s text tells us a great deal of what we need to know about regeneration. **(Read Verse 22-32)**

First, this text was God’s word to Ezekiel about the future of the nation of Israel, how He will

save them. As such, the IMMEDIATE context is for ETHNIC ISRAEL... God's not finished with them yet. Today's text ties with Romans 11 as it describes the mystery of how God will save Israel. (Romans 11:26) But before you make the mistake of thinking that this text is not about us as "modern day Christians" here in Knoxville, TN... remember that Romans 11 also tells us that Gentile Christians are "grafted" into the family tree of God. The context of this for us today is that the process of regeneration described here is the same for us... in other words, God has always saved his people in the same way: through regeneration.

The first thing I want us to take away from today's text is the **PRIORITY OF REGENERATION**. Let me ask you something: What is man's greatest need? Some might say we need food; some might say shelter... still others might say our greatest need is love. **The truth is that man's greatest need is to be spared God's righteous and just wrath against evil and wickedness.** When we proclaim the Gospel to people, we don't need to tell them that God has a wonderful plan for their life, nor do we tell them that they need to come to Christ to be given their best life now. When we proclaim the true Gospel, we use the Old Testament law to contrast their inherently wicked, evil natures with the Holy God of all existence... this shows everyone our DESPERATE need for Jesus.

You see, the Bible doesn't teach that mankind is mostly good or even partially good... Scripture EMPHATICALLY teaches that man is naturally wicked. We don't learn evil, it's not something that we have to grow into... we are BORN with it. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 51:5 that **"...I was brought forth in iniquity."** From BIRTH we are possessed by an atavistic compulsion towards cosmic treason... hear me: EVIL is in our very nature. In fact, wickedness is such a part of human nature that the unregenerate man CANNOT choose to do any good that pleases God. That is to say, all things natural man does is for selfish purposes and with ungodly motives. Not only is the natural, unregenerate man wicked and evil, he is an enemy of God. Romans 8:7 says that **"... because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so."** When we street preach, people often swear at us, show us obscene gestures and sometimes even threaten us with bodily assault. The public proclamation of Scripture is *like fingernails on the chalkboard* for those with unregenerate hearts. We do NOT take offense when people swear at us for proclaiming the Gospel because it's in their NATURE.

Here is why this is important: the unregenerate heart is eternally lost, destined to spend an eternity in the place that God has created for His enemies. They will be cast into the fires of Hell, a place where the Bible says the worm doesn't die and the flame is not quenched. It will be a place of torment and torture beyond human imagination... and there will be no second chance or respite. In Matthew 7, the Lord Jesus painted a picture of what a deceived, unregenerate heart will hear when they stand before Him: they will be told to depart from Him for an eternity. I posit that those are the most eternally terrifying words that anyone will ever hear.

There is a certain gravity to this... JC Ryle wrote this: "No salvation without regeneration – no spiritual life without a new birth – no heaven without a new heart." Regeneration is important because our eternal destination depends on it.

The second thing I want us to observe in this text is the **PROCESS OF REGENERATION**. We've established they need for regeneration... but who brings it about? Is it man? Regeneration is not a checklist of moral obligations for man to follow. Charles Spurgeon used the analogy of a pig... if you take the pig out of the mud and clean it up what will it do when it finds another mudhole? Jump right back into the mud, wagging its little tail as happy as can be. Why?

Because that's the nature of the PIG. The same applies to natural man...he can pretend for a while, but eventually the natural man's truly wicked nature will show itself.

So, then who authors this necessary change in the hearts of men? Look at the pronouns, starting in verse 25: "...**I** will sprinkle clean water, **I** will cleanse you you're your idols. (Verse 26) **I** will give you a new heart, replacing your heart of stone with flesh. **I** will put m y spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes." This text makes it very clear that Salvation is of the Lord.

Nowhere in this process in Ezekiel 26 do we see man doing anything to help change His wretched condition...in fact, the unregenerate man has no desire to do so. Verse 26 says that the unregenerate man has a heart of cold, unfeeling stone...another way to look at this is to say that the unregenerate man is DEAD. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus and told them in Eph 2:1 that "You were DEAD in your trespasses and sins." What can a dead man do about his condition? NOTHING! He cannot rouse himself from the grave, sit up and take stock of the situation and exercise his conscious will to change Himself.

God does not do half the work in regeneration and salvation, expecting the individual to do the other half...in fact, God doesn't even do 99% and expect us to do the rest. **GOD DOES IT ALL!** If you are a child of God here today it's not because of your own doing, it's a gift of GOD, Ephesians 2:8. Paul Washer said that "Men are converted by a supernatural act of God that demonstrates more of the power of God than the creation of the universe." Regeneration is an absolute miracle, an act of God (not man) moving the universe to change the hearts of those whom He wills.

What does it mean to be washed clean, as it says in verse 25? It means that God takes the old desires away and replaces them with new. It means that God completely gives us a new nature. The heart of natural man can sin and sin some more, with no consequences, no heartache and no repentance...but the regenerate heart CANNOT. Our new nature recognizes our wickedness and understands that sin is cosmic treason against GOD HIMSELF...and this causes us to grieve.

While doing street evangelism, we come across many people who have the wrong idea. There is the idea that a person can be saved by God and not be regenerated...in other words, the idea is that a person can know Christ and still not be changed. This concept is known as the carnal Christian...but it's an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. You could liken it to an urban legend or an old wives' tale...like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness monster...the truth is, a carnal Christian simply does not exist. The Bible makes it explicitly clear that a heart cannot be touched by the hand of God and remain unchanged. 1 Corinthians 5:17 says that "**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away, behold, new things have come.**" There WILL be a marked difference between the old and new nature.

Third, I want us to look at the **PURPOSE OF REGENERATION**. Why? Why does the perfectly Holy, righteous and just God of all the universe condescend to regenerate hearts? Some might say because of love for His people...and that would be right. John 3:16 says that "**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.**" Yet, here in Ezekiel 36, God gives a specific reason for why He will regenerate the hearts of the nation of Israel...look at verse 22: "**it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name.**" You see, Israel had blasphemed the name of God by their actions, by defiling the Holy name of God by not following His commands...and the pagan nations around Israel noticed this. As such in verse 23, God promised to "vindicate the holiness of His great name." In other words, God promises to restore His good name by regenerating the hearts of the Israelites.

The same applies when God regenerates one of us. While it's clear that God has a great love for His children, a love that cannot be truly fathomed by our sin-skewed perception...he regenerates our hearts and gives us a new nature **FOR THE GLORY AND HONOR OF HIS NAME**. God's ultimate priority in regeneration is maintaining the integrity of His holy name.

Jeremiah Burroughs was a 17th century Puritan preacher and he wrote that "Though the lives of men are dear and precious to God, yet they are not so precious as His glory. The glory of His name is a thousand thousand times more dear unto God than the lives of a thousand thousands of people.

If you are a child of God here today...somewhere in the great expanse of eternity before creation, God decreed that He would make you His child by regenerating your heart. He decreed that you would become aware of your desperate need for Him and would fall upon your knees and call upon the name of Jesus. He decreed that your affections would change, that you would have a desire to follow Him and follow in the good works He set apart for you as described in Ephesians 2:10...and He did this for the same ultimate reason that He does ALL things...**FOR HIS GLORY!**

Let me drive this point home by pointing to what God says in Isaiah 48:11 "My own sake for my own sake I will act. For how can my name be profaned? And my glory I Will not give another."

We have looked at the Priority, the Process and the Purpose of...let's consider the **Product of Regeneration**. What does God tell the Israelites (and us as well) will be the end result of regeneration? Look at verse 31: "Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sights for your iniquities and abominations." The context therein is clear: a regenerate heart mourns its own sin.

Now before we go further, hear me clearly: a child of God is not held captive to their own sin. Romans 6:6 says that our old self...our naturally wicked, unregenerate heart...was crucified upon the cross. In other words, our old wicked nature has NO HOLD upon us. That having been said, we still have patterns of sinful behavior that influence us, even after we've been given regenerate hearts. As Christians, every time that we sin, it's a CHOICE. The difference between a regenerate and unregenerate heart is this: a regenerate heart mourns sin. It eats at us...it gnaws at our inside...it causes us to lose sleep and to hate the actions that we commit. A regenerate heart is not sorry for the consequences of sin; rather instead, the it mourns because it has sinned against GOD HIMSELF. Remember, Jesus said in Matthew 5:4 that those who mourn are blessed because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. In other words, a God-honoring, Biblical sorrow for sin is proof of regeneration.

A regenerate heart also repents of sin. When one repents of sin, one turns away. Look at verse 25...God says that He will cleanse His people from their idols. Time and time again in Scripture, we see the Israelites falling prey to the idol worship of those pagan nations around them. In this text, God promises to take away that sinful desire, to remove any affection for idols. What about today's time...do people have idols? Of course, and the main idol that people worship is "SELF." **The regenerate heart, however, recognizes sin, mourns it and turns away from idolatry and toward Jesus.**

In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to address how they had embraced a sinner within their midst. Apparently the church had expelled the immoral brother and had repented of their sin, as Paul wrote back in 2 Corinthians 7:9 "**now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss**

in anything through us.” In other words, the church at Corinth mourned their sin so badly that they turned away from it and turned back to Christ...repentance of sin is proof of regeneration. Lastly, a regenerate heart obeys. Look at verse 27: **“I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and you will be careful to observe my ordinances.”** God promises to change the hearts of His people to such a degree that they have a desire to follow His commands in obedience. A truly regenerate heart cannot live happily in continued, willful disobedience any more than an unregenerate heart can please God. In John 14 as Jesus comforts His disciples and prepares them for His coming crucifixion, He made a profound statement about the obedience of the regenerate heart: In verse 15, Jesus said “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Obedience to the commands of God...especially the difficult ones... is proof of regeneration.

Make no mistake, friends...a regenerate heart is a changed one. If you show me a professing Christian who has had no change in their life after coming to Christ, I will show you a non-believer. Let me read to you one last quote...this one from quote from Thomas Watson... another Puritan preacher. He said that “The devil would have Christ prove Himself to be God by turning stones into bread, but the Holy Ghost shows His Godhead by turning stones into flesh.”

In closing...what about you? I carry these tracts with me when we do street ministry. It’s a tract by JC Ryle and the title of it is “Are You Born Again?” Every person I talk to on the street that claims to know Christ...I try to go through this tract with them. It contains benchmarks of the Christian faith, similar to what I’ve said to you today.

Again, what about you? Has your heart been regenerated by God? Have you been reborn and given new life in Christ? Does your life bear the marks of regeneration...do you mourn sin; do you repent of sin and do you obey the commands of Christ? If so...praise God for the work He’s done in your life...if not...I implore you, I beg of you. Repent of your unbelief and call upon the name of Jesus Christ, asking him to regenerate you, to give you a new life in Him.

Community Group Questions

- What part of this sermon made the biggest impression, if any? Discuss with your group.
- This text was given to Israel by way of Ezekiel the prophet. Discuss how the immediate context deals with Israel (hint: Romans 11) and how the context differs or parallels (if it all) for Christians today.
- What does regeneration look like in the life of a believer?
- Is regeneration a priority for all people? Why or why not?
- Why is a Biblical understanding of regeneration important in the life of a believer?

(Questions 3 and 4 go hand in hand.)

- Discuss the difference (if any) between the theological terms of justification and regeneration.

- Refute or defend the JC Ryle quote: “No salvation without regeneration – no spiritual life without a new birth – no heaven without a new heart.”
- Discuss why the term “carnal Christian” is an oxymoron.
- Discuss the 1st John test, it’s purpose in the Membership Matters class and how it relates to Ezekiel 36:22-32 (if at all) and regeneration.
- Refute or defend the Jeremiah Burroughs quote: “Though the lives of men are dear and precious to God, yet they are not so precious as His glory. The glory of God is a thousand thousand times more dear unto God than the lives of a thousand thousands of His people.” Cite contemporary examples of how God this quote is either true or false.