

# Regeneration

## *Module 3.4*

The miracle of salvation is wholly, and only, a work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:3-14) and it is an all-encompassing miracle not of our own doing (Ephesians 2:8-9). The moment someone places their faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation a miracle happens; the dead have just been made alive (Ephesians 2:1-5)!

Within the Charis Fellowship, our understanding of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration is greatly informed by Jesus' words to Nicodemus, found in John 3. During this nighttime conversation with "the teacher of Israel," Jesus tells Nicodemus that to "see the kingdom of God"<sup>1</sup> one must be born again and that this new birth does not happen by a person physically reentering their mother's womb. This new birth happens by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8) as men and women place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing on, in verses 9-16, Jesus gives further clarity regarding the basis on which the Spirit gives new birth, comparing himself to the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (Numbers 21). By doing so Jesus illustrates both the nature of saving faith and the gracious, saving, power of God.

In Numbers 21, Moses records the continued grumblings and wanderings of the Nation of Israel. Specifically, in verse 5 we are told that, "...the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.'"<sup>3</sup> As a result, "the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died" (vs. 6). When the people come to Moses and acknowledge their sin they ask for him to pray for them that the LORD may "...take away the serpents from us" (vs. 7). Moses does, and the LORD instructs Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and to instruct those who are bitten to look at the serpent for, "...when he sees it..." he "shall live" (vs. 8). Moses obeys, making the serpent out of bronze and then sets it on a pole. As the LORD promised, anyone bitten by a fiery serpent would not die, if they looked toward the serpent that Moses had made.

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<sup>1</sup> A statement that, in context, should be considered equal to "have eternal life" in vs. 15, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright ©2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that the Nation of Israel grumbled that God was not meeting their particular appetites, *not* that God was absent in meeting their daily needs.

As we consider this incredible event from Israel's history, and Jesus' use of this type, several important truths stand out and are worth noting. 1) Sin has consequences and ultimately brings death. 2) God is holy, righteous, and completely just in punishing sinners. 3) God promised, and provided, physical salvation for those who looked upon the bronze serpent. 4) The Israelites who placed their faith and trust in the promises of God, by looking at the bronze serpent, did not physically die.

Just as the sin of the Israelites had grave consequences, so does Nicodemus' sin...and our sin. Just as God was holy, righteous, and completely just in punishing those in Numbers 21 with physical death, he is equally just in punishing us with death and "whoever does not believe [in the Son] is condemned already" (John 3:18b). Just as God promised, and provided, physical salvation for those who looked at the bronze serpent, he has promised, and provided, salvation for those who look upon Jesus. Just as the Israelites were saved by placing their faith and trust in the promises of God, we too are saved by placing our faith and trust in the promises of God that "whoever believes in him [the Son] will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Regeneration, or new birth, is the work of the Holy Spirit that happens as those who "he chose...before the foundation of the world..." (Ephesians 1:4) place their faith and trust in Jesus. It is wholly and only a work of our triune God and only by his grace.<sup>4</sup>

At the moment of new birth, or regeneration, several tremendously important things also take place in the life of the one who has just been saved. Specifically, "*we affirm that the Holy Spirit's works of baptizing, sealing, and indwelling occur simultaneously with regeneration and are the possession of every true believer.*" By this we mean, those who have been born again do not wait for a second blessing of the Holy Spirit. While there may be multiple instances where the Holy Spirit fills, or empowers, a believer for life and ministry these experiences are not to be understood as a second blessing of the Holy Spirit or the completing of the Holy Spirit's work.

One of the questions the church in Corinth had asked the Apostle Paul was about the differences between spiritual gifts, or people, and their role and value within the community of believers.<sup>5</sup> In answering their questions, Paul specifically writes that "For in one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body..." (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Indeed, there are a variety of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4), but there is only one body (1 Corinthians 12:12) and all have been baptized in one Spirit into this body. There are no

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<sup>4</sup> This module paper will not deal with whether or not regeneration precedes saving faith or if saving faith causes regeneration.

<sup>5</sup> See module 3.7 for a more detailed explanation of Paul's answer.

true believers currently awaiting the baptism of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Furthermore, not only does the Holy Spirit immediately and simultaneously baptize true believers into the body of Christ he also indwells and seals them.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the constant and abiding presence of the Spirit of Christ in the life of the believer. To have placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ is to have the Spirit of Christ dwell in you. Paul writes in Romans 8:9-11,

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

From this passage, several important truths emerge: First, being in the flesh is contrasted with being in the Spirit and this language is nearly identical to what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:6.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them does not belong to Christ. However, those who do belong to Christ have the Spirit of Christ living within them.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, the indwelling of the Spirit is the guarantee that what God has begun in us he will complete (Philippians 1:6). True believers have been born again, regenerated, spiritually and are now indwelt by the Holy Spirit who will one day give life to their mortal bodies.

The promise and guarantee of the Holy Spirit giving life to our mortal bodies and finishing the good work that God has begun in us is referred to as the “sealing” of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13-14 “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 5 we are told “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” At the moment of regeneration, true believers are baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, immediately indwelt by the Holy Spirit as God’s temple, and

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<sup>6</sup> In John 3, Jesus uses the word flesh (σάρκα) to refer to the physical body and Paul uses the word flesh (σάρκι) to refer to part of our humanity that is opposed or in contrast to the Spirit. While there are differences in the meaning of flesh that Jesus and Paul use, the meaning of Spirit in both passages is the same.

<sup>7</sup> In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul grounds his command to flee sexual immorality on the truth that our bodies have now become the “temple of the Holy Spirit” and in 2 Corinthians 6, Paul grounds his command to not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever in the exact same way.

sealed with the Holy Spirit who guarantees that the good work that God has begun, He will indeed complete.

Because of these truths we also “*affirm that true believers put their trust in Jesus and are kept forever in the saving grace of God through His promises and His power. Every believer has been eternally justified, blessed with all spiritual blessings, and set free from all condemnation.*” By this we mean that true saints will persevere; true believers are eternally secure. Consequently, while the Charis Fellowship does not have an official position regarding Calvinism or Arminian theology we do unequivocally believe in the eternal security of the true believer.<sup>8</sup>

Within the New Testament, and through the broader arc of redemption history, we clearly see that God knows and keeps those who are his. As Jesus said in John 10:27-30 “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.” God the Father has sealed true believers with the Holy Spirit and therefore guarantees that they are inseparable from his love for them in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

At the moment of salvation, those who place their faith and trust in Jesus are baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, indwelt with the Holy Spirit becoming a temple of the living God, sealed with the Holy Spirit who guarantees that they are eternally secure, and empowered by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts to glorify God and build up the body of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, we must also answer the question, “who is a true believer?” for it is the word “true” that qualifies all of the truths articulated within this module paper. In short, a true believer is one who has repented of their sin, trusts only in Jesus Christ for their salvation, and now desires to submit to, and live in obedience to, Christ as their Lord.

In contrast, to merely acknowledge that certain historical facts are true is not enough for someone to be born again, for “even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). To merely attend a local church and function within a community of believers is not enough, for there were many Israelites that failed to enter the rest of God because of their disobedience of unbelief (Hebrews 3:18-19), even though they were ethnically a part of the covenant people of God.

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<sup>8</sup> There undoubtedly will be some who will posit that a conviction of eternal security or “perseverance of the saints” cannot be separated from the other petals of the “TULIP”. While there is soundness to this argument, such an argument is outside the scope of this module paper.

<sup>9</sup> Spiritual Gifts will be further outlined and unpacked in module 3.7

Indeed, true believers do acknowledge the facts of the Bible to be true and are active in the life and function of a local community of believers. However, these things do not make them true believers. A true believer is one who has repented of their sin, trusts only in Jesus Christ for their salvation, and now desires to submit to, and live in obedience to, Christ as their Lord.

Now, in applying this definition, we must readily acknowledge that we do not know the condition of anyone's heart; whether they have been born again or not. What we can observe, and know to a certain degree, is the fruit that results from a life of repentance, trust, and submission to Christ as Lord. It is to these things that Jesus points in Matthew 7:21 and speaks of clearly in John 15:9-17.<sup>10</sup>

It is these men and women who the Holy Spirit has regenerated. It is these men and women who are indwelt, sealed, gifted, and forever kept by the Holy Spirit. It is these men and women who, in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, have been "born again."

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever.

Amen.

Jude 24-25

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<sup>10</sup> There is a continual tension present within the New Testament regarding salvation and good works. To be sure, we do not work for our salvation, our sanctification, and we are not eternally secure because our ability to live a life of good works that please the Lord. Justification, sanctification, and glorification are all gifts of God that are not the result of our works. However, *because* of our salvation believers are called to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13), and to "make every effort to supplement your faith..." qualities which keep us from being "ineffective and unfruitful" (2 Peter 1:5a, 8).