

Regeneration

The doctrine of God's special, inward call to the elect involves the work of the Spirit of God in preparing the heart to receive the Gospel. This is illustrated by the promise of Ezekiel (11:19; 36:26) that in the last days, God would remove the heart of stone from Israel and give them a heart of flesh. This "heart renewal" results in their repentance and faith in God. Similarly, in these same verses Ezekiel speaks of giving Israel a "new spirit." In essence, this is what is meant when we speak of regeneration in the context of soteriology.

Fallen mankind is characterized as "dead in their trespasses and sins" (Rom 6:13; Eph 2:1). This metaphor is used in order to make clear that response to the Gospel is impossible, since those who are dead do not respond. Thus, in order for there to be a positive response to the Gospel, the one who is dead in sin must be made alive. Sometimes this coming to life is pictured as a "new birth" or as a "new creation." Thus, the primary metaphors used to describe regeneration in the Bible are resurrection, birth, and creation, all of which have this one thing in common: the action must come from outside of the person and not by his or her own efforts. These metaphors therefore emphasize the sovereign work of God. Obviously, one who is dead cannot bring himself to life; one who is unborn cannot birth himself; and one who is not yet created cannot recreate himself.

Another emphasis of these metaphors is the decisiveness they represent. Creation, birth, and resurrection all speak of beginnings without any sense of reverting to the former state.

The regenerate man has forever ceased to be the man he was; his old life is over and a new life has begun; he is a new creature in Christ, buried with him out of reach of condemnation and raised with him into a new life of righteousness. [J. I. Packer, "Regeneration" in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 1960), p. 440.]

The word "regeneration" is based upon the Latin *genero*, "to beget, produce, bring to life," and thus means literally "to be reborn," "brought to life again." The Greek word is παλιγγενεσία (*palinginesia*), which means "a state of being renewed," "rebirth," "complete change of life." It is found only twice in the Apostolic Scriptures: Matt 19:28, of the eschatological renewal and consummation, and Tit 3:5, of personal salvation. The word is not found in the Lxx.

In the Tanach, the idea of regeneration or renewal is found in terms such as Ps 30:3[4] in the piel stem, meaning "bring back to life." We find this in Ps 30:3[4]

Adonai, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; You restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit. (ESV)

Note also Hosea 6:2–

After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

Likewise, the prophecies of Ezekiel mentioned above, which speak of Israel being given a new heart and a new spirit, as well as the cleansing they will undergo, being sprinkled with clean water (cf. 36:25), offer the pictures of regeneration. Jeremiah speaks to this in his prophecy of the new covenant (31:31–34, cf. 32:40).

The longing for such renewal on a national scale is seen in the prayer of the Psalmist: Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand; Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. Then we shall not turn back from You; Revive us, and we will call upon Your name. Adonai God of hosts, restore us; Cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved. (Ps 80:17–19, cf. 85:4)

In the Apostolic Scriptures, the doctrine of regeneration is more fully individualized, though the sense of corporate revival is not entirely missing. In John 3, the words of Yeshua to Nachdimon incorporate the metaphor of regeneration:

Yeshua answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (v. 3)

The Greek phrase "unless one is born again" is εἰ μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, where the adverb ἄνωθεν, *anōthen*, can mean either "again" or "from above." Many evangelical scholars take the view that *anōthen* means "from above" in this case, so that what Yeshua is stressing is the need for spiritual birth, something only God can do. In v. 5 Yeshua gives further explanation of what He means by "born from above" –

Yeshua answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Here, “the water and the Spirit” reflect Ezekiel’s words that promise a “new spirit” to be given to Israel and their cleansing by “sprinkling clean water” upon them. Thus, to be “born of the water and the Spirit” means to undergo the divine work of regeneration by which the individual is made able and willing to receive the message of the Gospel with repentance toward God and faith in His Messiah.

Moreover, regeneration is clearly stated to be the work of God by His Spirit, for it is beyond the ability of man to understand it or to control it:

Do not be amazed that I said to you, “You must be born again.” 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. (vv. 7–8)

The primary emphasis of Yeshua to Nachdimon, however, is that regeneration, or being “born from above,” is essential to salvation. Apart from the new birth, no one will understand (“see”) nor enter into the Kingdom of God. This accords with the words of John in his opening prologue (1:12–13) –

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

In his first epistle, John also speaks of regeneration or the new birth that comes through the work of the Spirit. Those who experience this new birth do righteousness (1Jn 2:29) and do not live a life characterized by sin (3:9; 5:18). They experience victory over the world (5:4). Any whose lives are not characterized by these things, regardless of what they may claim, are still unregenerate children of the devil (3:6–10).

Paul speaks of regeneration in Christological terms in what has become known as “union with Christ (Messiah).” In Romans 6 Paul teaches that the believer has died “with Messiah” and has therefore likewise “risen with Him to newness of life” (vv. 1–11, cf. Eph 2:5; Col 2:13; cp. 1Pet 1:3). He also uses the metaphor of creation when he teaches that the believer is a “new creation in Messiah” –

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Cor 5:17)

This union with the Messiah in His death and resurrection means that God reckons the death of Messiah to all those for whom He died, as full payment for their sins, and gives to them a new life in spiritual resurrection. Once again, Paul makes it clear that this union with Messiah in His saving work is the result of God’s sovereign mercy and grace, not something that could be earned or accomplished by one’s own efforts:

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 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 Yeshua Messiah our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3–7)

The language Paul utilizes here, “by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,” is clearly based upon the words of the Prophets as they spoke of the saving miracle God will do for Israel in the last days. The washing hearkens to the *mikveh* and the laws of ceremonial cleansing established by the Torah as an illustration of the inward work the Spirit does to all who are born from above. The renewing is also pictured in the Prophets who portray Israel as forsaking their sinful ways and returning to the Lord in faith and faithfulness.