

REGENERATION OR THE NEW BIRTH Chapter 3 ITS EFFECTS

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Transcript

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Chapter 3

ITS EFFECTS

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Though the wind be imperious in its action, man being unable to regulate it; though it be mysterious in its nature man knowing nothing of the cause which controls it; yet its presence is unmistakable, its effects are plainly evidenced: so it is with every one that is born of the Spirit. His secret but powerful operations lie beyond the reach of our understanding. Why God has ordained that the Spirit should quicken this person and not that, we know not, but the transforming results of His working are plain and palpable. What there are, we shall now endeavor to describe. 1. The illumination of the understanding. As it was in the old creation, so it is in connection with the new. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). That was the original creation. Then came degeneration: "And the earth became without form and void (a desolate waste) and darkness was upon the face of the deep." Next came restoration: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, and God said, Let there be light: and there was light." So it is when God begins to restore fallen man: "For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The Divine illumination which the mind receives at the new birth is not by means of dreams or visions, nor does it consist in the revelation of things to the soul which have not been made known in the Scriptures. Not so, the only means or instrument which the Holy Spirit employs is the written Word: "The entrance of Thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (Ps. 119:130). Hitherto, God's Word may have been read attentively, and much of its teaching intellectually apprehended; but because there was a "vail" upon the heart (2 Cor. 3:15) and so no spiritual discernment (1 Cor. 2:14), the reader was not inwardly affected thereby. But now the Spirit removes the vail, opens the heart to receive the Word (Acts 16:14), and powerfully applies to the mind and conscience some portion of it. The result is that, the one renewed is able to say "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25). To particularize: The sinner is now enlightened in the knowledge of his own terrible condition. He may, before this, have received much scriptural instruction, subscribed to a sound creed, and believed intellectually in "the total depravity of man"; but now the solemn declarations of God's Word concerning the state of the

fallen creature are brought home in piercing power to his own soul. No longer does he compare himself with his fellows, but measures himself by the rule of God. He now discovers that he is unclean, that his heart is "desperately wicked," and that he is altogether unfit for the presence of the thrice holy God. He is powerfully convicted of his own awful sins, feels that they are more in number than the hairs of his head, and that they are high provocations against Heaven, which call for Divine judgment on him. He now realizes that there is "no soundness" (Isa. 1:6) in him, and that all his best performances are only as "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6), and that he is deserving of nought but the everlasting burnings. By the spiritual light which God communicates in regeneration the soul now perceives the infinite demerits of sin, that its "wages" can be nothing less than eternal death, or the loss of Divine favor and a dreadful suffering under the wrath of God. The equity of God's law and the fact that sin righteously calls for such punishment is humbly acknowledged. Thus his mouth is "stopped" and he confesses himself to be guilty before God, and justly liable to His awful vengeance, both for the plague of his own heart and his numerous transgressions. He now realizes that his whole life has been lived in utter independence of God, having had no respect for His glory, no concern whether he pleased or displeased Him. He now perceives the exceeding sinfulness of sin, its awful malignity, as being in its nature contrary to the law of God. How to escape the due reward of his iniquity, he knows not. "What must I do to be saved?" is his agonizing cry. He is convinced of the absolute impossibility of contributing anything to his deliverance. He no longer has any confidence in the flesh; he has been brought to the end of himself. By means of this illumination the renewed soul, under the guidance of the Spirit through the Word, now perceives how well-suited is Christ to such a poor, worthless wretch as he feels himself to be. The prospect of obtaining deliverance from the wrath to come through the victorious life and death of the Lord Jesus, keeps his soul from being overwhelmed with grief and from sinking into complete despondency because of the sight of his sins. As the Spirit presents to him the infinite merits of Christ's obedience and righteousness, His tender compassion for sinners, His power to save, desires for an interest in Christ now possesses his heart, and he is resolved to look for salvation in no other. Under the benign influences of the Holy Spirit, the soul is drawn by some such words as, "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest," or "him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out," and he is led to apply to Him for pardon, cleansing, peace, righteousness, strength. Other acts besides turning unto Christ flow from this new principle received at regeneration, such as repentance, which is a godly sorrow for sin, an abhorring of it as sin, and an earnest desire to forsake and be completely delivered from its pollution. In the light of God, the renewed soul now perceives the utter vanity of the world, and the worthlessness of these paltry toys and perishing trifles which the godless strive so hard to acquire. He has been awakened from the dream-sleep of death, and things are now seen in their true nature. Time is precious and not to be frittered away. God in His awesome Majesty is an object to be feared. His law is accepted as holy, just and good. All of these perceptions and actions are included in that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. In some these actions are more vigorous than in others, and consequently, are more perceptible to a man's self. But the fruits of them are visible to others in external acts.

2. The elevation of the heart. Rightly does the Lord claim the first place: "he that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37). "My son, give Me thine heart" (Prov. 23:26) expresses God's claim: they "first gave their own selves to the Lord" (2 Cor. 8:5) declares the response of the regenerate. But it is not until they are born again that any are spiritually capacitated to do this, for by nature men are "lovers of their own selves" and "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:2, 4). When a sinner is renewed, his affections are taken off his idols and fixed on the Lord (1 Thess. 1:9). Hence it is written "with the heart (the affections) man believeth unto righteousness" (Rom. 10:10). And hence, also, it is written, "if any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ let him be accursed" (1 Cor. 16:22). "And the Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy

God with all thy heart" (Deut. 30:6). The "circumcising" of the heart is the "renewing" of it, severing its love from all illicit objects. None can truly love God supremely till this miracle of grace has been wrought within him. Then it is that the affections are refined and directed to their proper objects. He who once was despised by the soul, is now beheld as the "altogether lovely" One. He who was hated (John 15:18), is now loved above all others. "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee" (Ps. 73:25) is now their joyous confession. The love of God has become the governing principle of the life (2 Cor. 5:13). What before was a drudgery is now a delight. The praise of man is no longer the motive which stimulates action; the approbation of the Saviour is the Christian's highest concern. Gratitude moves a hearty compliance with His will. "How precious also are Thy thoughts unto me, O God" (Ps. 139:17) is now his language. And again, "the desire of our soul is to Thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee. With my soul have I desired Thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek Thee early" (Isa. 26:8, 9). So too the heart is drawn out to all the members of His family, no matter what their nationality, social position, or church-connection: "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14).

3. The emancipation of the will. By nature, the will of fallen man is free in only one direction: away from God. Sin has enslaved the will, therefore do we need to be "made free" (John 8:36). The two states are contrasted in Romans 6: "free from righteousness" (v. 20), when dead in sin; "free from sin" (v. 18), now that we are alive unto God. At the new birth the will is liberated from the "bondage of corruption" (Rom. 8:21 and cf. 2 Pet. 2:19) and rendered conformable to the will of God (Ps. 119:97). In our degenerate state the will was naturally rebellious, and its practical language was, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him?" (Ex. 5:2). But the Father promised the Son, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power" (Ps. 110:3), and this is accomplished when God "worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 and cf. Heb. 13:21). "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 seek My judgments, and do them" (Ezek. 36:26, 27). This is a new covenant promise (Heb. 8:10), and is made good in each renewed soul. The will is so emancipated from the power of indwelling sin as to be enabled to answer to the Divine commands according to the tenor of the new covenant. The regenerated freely consent to and gladly choose to walk in subjection to Christ, being anxious now to obey Him in all things. His authority is their only rule, His love the constraining power: "If a man love Me, he will keep My words" (John 14:23).

4. The rectification of the conduct. A tree is known by its fruits. Faith is evidenced by works. The principle of holiness manifests itself in a godly walk. "If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him" (1 John 2:29). The deepest longing of every child of God is to please his heavenly Father in all things, and though this longing is never fully realized in this life—"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect" (Phil. 3:12)—nevertheless he continues "reaching forth unto those things which are before." "Ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine whereto ye were delivered" (Rom. 6:17 mar.). The Greek word for "form" here signifies "mold." Observe how this figure also presupposes the same faculties after the new birth as before. Metal which is molded remains the same metal it was previously, only the fashion or form of it is altered. That metal which before was a dish, is now turned into a cup, and thus a new name is given to it: cf. Revelation 3:12. By regeneration the faculties of the soul are made suitable to God and His precepts, just as the mould and the thing molded fit one another. As before the heart was at enmity against every commandment, it is now molded to them. Does God say, "Fear Me," the renewed heart answers, "I desire to fear Thy name" (Neh. 1:11). Does God say, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy," the heart answers, "the sabbath is my delight" (Isa. 58:13). Does God say, "love one another," the new creature finds an instinct begotten within him to do so, so that real Christians are said to be "taught of

God to love one another" (1 Thess. 4:9). A change will take place in the deportment of the most moral unconverted man as soon as he is born from above. Not only will he be far less eager in his pursuit of the world, more scrupulous in the selection of his company, more cautious in avoiding the occasions to sin and the appearance of evil, but he realizes that the holy eye of God is ever upon him, marking not only his actions, but weighing his motives. He now bears the sacred name of Christ, and his deepest concern is to be kept from everything which would bring reproach upon it. His aim is to let his light so shine before men that they may see his good works and glorify his Father which is in Heaven. That which occasions him the deepest distress is not the sneers and taunts of the ungodly, but that he fails to measure up to the standard God has set before him and the conformity to it after which he so much yearns. Though Divine grace may preserve him from outward falls, yet he is painfully conscious of many sins within: the risings of unbelief, the swellings of pride, the oppositions of the "flesh" to the desires of the "spirit." These occasion him deep exercises of heart and lead to humble and sorrowful confessions unto God. It is of great importance that the Christian should have clear and scriptural views of what he is both as the subject of sin and of grace. Though the regenerate are delivered from the absolute dominion of sin (Rom. 6:14), yet the principle of sin, the "flesh" is not eradicated. This is clear from Romans 6:12, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof": that exhortation would be meaningless if there were no indwelling sin seeking to reign, and no lusts demanding obedience. Yet this is far from saying that a Christian must go on in a course of sinning: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for His seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9), the reference there being to the regular practice and habit of sinning. Nevertheless, prayerful heed needs to be constantly paid to this word, "Awake to righteousness, and sin not" (1 Cor. 15:34). The experiences of Paul, both as a subject of sin and of grace, are recorded in Romans 7. A careful reading of verses 14-24 reveals the fact that grace had neither removed nor purified the "flesh" in him. And as the Christian today compares his own inner conflicts, he finds that Romans 7 describes them most accurately and faithfully. He discovers that in his "flesh" is no good thing and he cries "O wretched man that I am." Though he longs for fuller conformity to the image of Christ, though he hungers and thirsts after righteousness, though he is under the influence and reign of grace, and though he enjoys real fellowship with God, yet, at seasons (some more acutely felt than others) he feels that though with the mind he serves the law of God, yet with the flesh the law of sin. Yea, every experience of reading the Word, prayer, meditation, proves to him that he is, in his fallen nature, "carnal, sold under sin," and that when he would do good, evil is present with him. This is a matter of great grief to him, and causes him to "groan" (Rom. 8:23) and yearn the more for release from this body of death. But ought not the Christian to "grow in grace?" Yes, indeed. Yet let it be said emphatically that growing "in grace" most certainly does not mean an increasing satisfaction with myself. No, it is the very opposite. The more I walk in the light of God, the more plainly can I see the wiliness of the "flesh" within me, and there will be an ever-deepening abhorrence of what I am by nature. "For to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom. 7:18) is not the confession of an unbeliever, nor even of a babe in Christ, but of the most enlightened saint. The only relief from this distressing discovery and the only peace for the renewed heart is to look away from self to Christ and His perfect work for us. Faith empties of all self-complacency and gives an exalted estimate of God in Christ. A growth "in grace" is defined, in part by the words that immediately follow: "and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). It is the growing realization of the perfect suitability of Christ to a poor sinner, the deepening conviction of his fitness to be the Saviour of such a vile wretch as the Spirit daily shows me I am. It is the apprehension of how much I need His precious-blood to cleanse me, His righteousness to clothe me, His arm to support me, His advocacy to answer for me on High, His grace to deliver me from all my enemies both inward and outward. It is the Spirit revealing to me that there

is in Christ everything that I need both for earth and Heaven, time and eternity. Thus, growing in grace is an increasing living outside of myself, living upon Christ. It is a looking to Him for the supply of every need. The more the heart is occupied with Christ, the more the mind is stayed upon Him by trusting in Him (Isa. 26:3), the more will faith, hope, love, patience, meekness, and all spiritual graces be strengthened and drawn forth into exercise and act to the glory of God. The manifestation of growth in grace and in the knowledge of Christ is another thing. The actual process of growing is not perceptible either in the natural or in the spiritual sphere; but the results of it are—mainly so to others. There are definite seasons of growth, and generally the Christian's spiritual graces are growing the most while the soul is in distress through manifold temptations, mourning on account of indwelling sin. It is when we are enjoying God and are in conscious communion with Him, feasting upon the perfections of Christ, that the fruits of the Spirit in us are ripened. The chief evidences of spiritual growth in the Christian are a deepening hatred of sin and loathing of self, a higher valuation of spiritual things, and yearning after them, a fuller recognition of our deep need and dependency on God to supply it. Regeneration is substantially the same in all who are the subjects of it: there is a spiritual transformation, the conforming of the soul unto the image of God: "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). But although every regenerated person is a new creature, has received a principle of faith and holiness which acts on every faculty of his being, and is indwelt and led by the Holy Spirit, yet God does not communicate the same measure of grace (Rom. 12:3; 2 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 4:16) or the same number of talents to all alike. God's children differ from each other as children do at their natural birth, some of whom are more lively and vigorous than others. God, according to His sovereign pleasure, gives to some a fuller knowledge, to others stronger faith, to others warmer affections—natural temperament has much to do with the form and color which the manifestation of the "spirit" takes through us. But there is no difference in their state: the same work has been performed in all, which radically differentiates them from worldlings. "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" (1 Cor. 6:2). Does not this clearly denote, yea, require, that the "saints" shall exercise a distinguishing holiness and live quite otherwise than the world? Could one who now takes the Lord's name in vain be righteously appointed to sit in judgment upon those who profane it? Could one who lives to please self be a fit person to judge those who have loved pleasure more than God? Could one who has despised and ridiculed 'puritanic strictness of living,' sit with Christ as a judge on those who lived in rebellion against Him? Never: instead of being the judges of others, all such will find themselves condemned and executed as malefactors in that Day. "The Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11). "Grace and glory" are inseparably connected: they differ not in nature, but in degree. "Grace" is glory begun; "glory" is grace elevated to the acme of perfection. 1 John 3:2 tells us that the saints shall be "like Him," and this, because they will "see Him as He is." The immediate vision of the Lord of glory will be a transforming one, the bright reflections of God's purity and holiness cast upon the glorified will make them perfectly holy and blessed. But this resemblance to God, His saints do here, in measure, bear upon them: there are some outlines, some lineaments of God's image stamped upon them, and this too is through beholding Him. True, it is (comparatively speaking) through a glass darkly, yet "beholding" we "are changed into the same image from glory to glory (from one degree of it to another) as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). In conclusion, let both writer and reader test and search himself in the presence of God, by these questions. How stands my heart affected toward sin? Is there a deep humiliation and godly sorrow after I have yielded thereto? Is there a genuine detestation of it? Is my conscience tender, so that my peace is disturbed by what the world calls "trifling faults" and "little things?" Am I humbled when conscious of the risings of pride and self-will? Do I loathe my inward corruption? What engages my mind in sea sons of recreation? Are my affections dead toward the world an alive toward God? Do I find spiritual exercises pleasant and joyous or irksome and burdensome? Can I truthfully say,

"How sweet are Thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth (Ps. 119:103)? Is communion with God my highest joy? Is the glory of God dearer to me than all the world contains?"

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