

Born to Holiness

Introduction

A. Man's Need for Holiness

Hebrews 12:14 says that without holiness no one will see the Lord. To have a relationship with God, one must become holy. Jesus emphasized that the goal of every believer is holiness, saying, "Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father, who is in heaven, is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Peter quoted God's command in Leviticus 11:44 when he said, "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16).

Men are not holy--that's obvious. They are sinful. They do not think right, speak right, or act right according to God's perfect standards. They do not rightly perceive God, His truth, His will, or themselves. Most people are oblivious to the fact that they are unrighteous. They do not willingly agree with the diagnosis of Scripture that they are sinful and are in need of holiness. Indirectly, men push off onto God the responsibility for their sinfulness. But verses 13-17 of James 1 have shown us that we have no one to blame but ourselves for our own sinfulness.

1. James 1:13-17--James has shown that man is filled with lust, which produces sin and results in death. To know God and enter into His eternal presence, we must be holy. Yet man is unholy and his sinful nature produces lust and evil.

2. Romans 3:9-18--Paul quotes several psalms revealing man's need for salvation because he is under the control of sin.

a) Man's sinfulness stated

"Both Jews and Greeks ... are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (vv. 9-10). There is not one human being created in this world since the fall of Adam who is right with God. Verses 11-12 say, "There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." No one fully comprehends that which God requires and is able to carry it out. The bent of man is to seek sin rather than God. John 3:19 says, "Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." When men divert themselves from the path that God ordained for righteousness, they become "unprofitable" or useless.

b) Man's sinfulness illustrated

"Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness" (vv. 13-14). The sin of such people stinks like a dead corpse. The throat, mouth, tongue, and lips identify the means of expression for their sinfulness. "Their

feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace have they not known. There is no fear [reverence] of God before their eyes" (vv. 15-18). Man is unwilling to follow God's law, let alone able to keep it.

Therefore all mankind is without excuse and stands "guilty before God" (v. 19).

There is no way that man, through his own efforts of keeping the law of God, can be justified by God. The law simply produces an awareness of sin; it doesn't produce righteousness (v. 20).

2. Ephesians 2:1-3--Paul told the Ephesians that before they believed were "dead in trespasses and sins; in which in times past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience" (vv. 1-2). Because of sin man is characterized as being dead. His daily conduct is dictated by the world's evil system, which is ruled by Satan. As unbelievers, we functioned "in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath" (v. 3). Unbelievers are the object of God's judgment.

To have a right relationship to God, man needs to be holy. And if by chance he recognizes that he is not holy, he wrongly tends to blame God for his circumstances.

So man apart from God is in a desperate state.

B. God's Provision of Holiness

James 1:18 says, "Of his [God's] own will begot he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." That simple verse speaks of the richness of the new birth. James introduces the subject of regeneration in verse 18 to show that God doesn't lead people into sin, but into a life of holiness.

The question is asked: What can man do to change his situation? Scripture makes it clear that external changes are not enough. Man cannot by some resolution determine that he's going to obey the law of God and work his way out of his spiritual deadness. Because he cannot give himself new life, he needs to be recreated. He needs a new heart, a new nature. In the words of Jesus, he needs to be "born again" (John 3:3). He needs to start over as if, in the words of Nicodemus, he could crawl back into his mother's womb and come out with a different nature (John 3:4). Since holiness is the condition for fellowship with God, sinful man in his fallen condition cannot experience that fellowship. And because God won't accept his corrupt nature, he needs a new and holy life.

1. Expressed

a) The internal corruption

Being born again is not simply adding something to an existing life. That would be like putting a ribbon on a sow. The change that man needs is not external, like a new suit of clothes; it's a total transformation. To enter into a right relationship with God demands that a person be recreated by God Himself. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm that.

(1) Jeremiah 17:9--"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

(2) Jeremiah 13:23--"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." Man cannot change his bent toward evil any more than a person or animal can change the appearance of their skin. Doing what is right demands a total transformation.

(3) 1 Corinthians 2:14--Man has to have a change at the very core of his being. The natural or unregenerate man "receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God." An unbeliever cannot understand or accept them because he's spiritually dead, so what he needs is a new life.

b) The internal correction

(1) Jeremiah 31:31-33--"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt ... but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, and will be their God, and they shall be my people." God has to change a man's heart because no one can do that on their own.

(2) Ephesians 2:5-6--"Even when we were dead in sins, [God] hath made us alive together with Christ ... and hath raised us up together." That's a spiritual resurrection to new life.

(3) Romans 6:4--When you put your faith in Christ, you die to your old self but rise to "walk in newness of life." The old life has to be totally done away with and a new life has to come.

(4) Ephesians 4:24--"Put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." When you come to salvation, you become a new person on the inside.

2. Examined

a) The search for new life

(1) The silent question

John 3 records the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, whom Jesus recognized as one of the prominent religious teachers of Israel (v. 10): "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (vv. 1-2). Although he was a man of great esteem, Nicodemus recognized Jesus as one who was significantly above himself.

Before Nicodemus could ask his question, Jesus answered it, for He knows what is

in every man's heart: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3). Although he was a spiritual leader in Israel, Nicodemus knew he had not entered into the Kingdom of God because he had no internal spiritual confirmation of that. Jesus told him in effect that even though he was a trusted and respected teacher he would have to start all over by being spiritually reborn.

(2) The symbolic question

"Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (v. 4). Nicodemus was not referring to the physical realm. He was simply using veiled parabolic language, a common rabbinical teaching device, by continuing the metaphor of birth that Jesus had introduced. He was asking how anyone--let alone a religious expert--who had spent so many years in a religion could ever undo all his religious beliefs and start again. If you have had the opportunity to witness to someone who has been entrenched in a religion for a long period, you understand the mind-set of Nicodemus.

b) The source of new life

(1) Identified

"Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (v. 5). Entering the Kingdom (salvation) is accomplished by an agent outside yourself--water and the Spirit. "Water" refers to the water of salvation mentioned in Ezekiel 36:25-27 (cf., Jer. 24:7) where God promised Israel, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. 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 keep mine ordinances, and do them." Jesus was speaking in very familiar terms to Nicodemus, for he knew the Old Testament promises of salvation and restoration mentioned in passages like Ezekiel 36. He told Nicodemus that he must have an internal cleansing by God's Holy Spirit. Similarly Paul spoke of "the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26) and "the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5) in reference to salvation. Salvation is a sovereign cleansing that comes from God who sends the Holy Spirit to indwell your heart and give you new life.

(2) Illustrated

Jesus went on to say, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it willeth, and thou hearest the sound of it, but canst not tell from where it cometh, and where it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (vv. 6-8). Jesus was saying, "Only the Spirit of God can produce spiritual life--that shouldn't be too surprising. And the spiritual regeneration He sovereignly accomplishes is like the wind--it's not something you can see or control.

Sinful man needs a new heart or, in New Testament terms, a new nature: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). A new birth is essential. That's what salvation is: God sovereignly and graciously cleansing the sinner to restore his relationship with Him, and planting His Spirit in him thus enabling him to obey the will of God. That's the purpose of regeneration.

Lesson

I. THE NATURE OF REGENERATION

A. The Energizing of Regeneration

Man's predicament seems like a vicious cycle: he doesn't know God because his sin separates him from God. Man generally doesn't recognize his unholiness, and if he does, he blames God for it. So one might wonder how he's ever going to break out of that cycle. It's not by attempting to meet higher standards or better ethics in his own power. The phrase "of his own will begot he us" in James 1:18 tells us that man needs divine intervention to wash away his sin and energizes his new life. That's the nature of regeneration. It's God giving new life to us as spiritually reborn beings. Using the same Greek word for birth that he uses in verse 15, James repeats the metaphor of giving birth. However rather than bringing forth death as sin does, God brings forth new spiritual life.

B. The Event of Regeneration

"Begot he us" looks back to when we were given new life as children of God. Theologian Louis Berkhof defines that new birth in these words: "Regeneration is that act of God by which the principle of the new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of the soul is made holy" (Systematic Theology, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941], p. 469). Regeneration is a total transformation. In fact, the apostle Peter says we "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). God shares His life with us and imputes His righteous to our account. Although we have yet to receive the fullness of our salvation (glorification and freedom from the presence of sin), a new-life principle is implanted in us in a moment of time. Salvation in that sense is an event, not a process.

C. The Effect of Regeneration

Because salvation is a spiritual event it is imperceptible to others. That's why it can be difficult to tell believers from unbelievers or, in the words of Jesus, to separate the wheat from the tares (Matt. 13:27-30). Salvation is, however, known through its effect. Although we can't see God recreate someone, the new-life principle given him enables and motivates him to overcome sin and live righteously.

No longer does sin have dominion over him (Rom. 6:14). Rather he willingly follows a new master--Jesus Christ--who came for the expressed purpose of giving life to spiritually dead men (John 10:10).

II. THE SOURCE OF REGENERATION

A. The Will of God

God the Father, mentioned in James 1:17 as the source of every good and perfect gift, is the One who begot us (v. 18). "Of his own will" occurs first in word order in the Greek text, making it emphatic. That highlights the sovereign will of God as the source of this new life. It couldn't be any other way because a dead person can't give life to himself. Regeneration results from the grace of the Giver, not the desire of the receiver, and even the desire of the receiver is prompted by God's grace (Eph. 2:8). Therefore salvation is wholly the choice and work of almighty God. So when a person is saved, God deserves all the credit.

B. The Response of Faith

1. To God's sovereign will

From a human perspective it appears we were active in believing and receiving Christ.

a) John 1:12-13--"As many as received him, to them gave he power [authority] to become the children of God, even to them that believe on his name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

You believed and received because it was the will of God. Similarly, no child has ever been born into the world because he or she wanted to be born. The birth of a child is strictly the decision of its parents.

b) John 6:44--Jesus indicated that spiritual birth is ultimately the decision of the Father: "No man can come to me, except the Father ... draw him." The very faith we exercise is graciously granted to us by God. Our conscious experience of committing our life to Jesus Christ--believing in His death and resurrection and opening our hearts to receive Him--is a consequence of God's sovereign will.

2. To God's gracious love

a) 1 John 4:19--When you stop to think that you're saved because He predetermined to bring you into an intimate love relationship with Himself, you ought to rejoice.

John put it this way: "We love him, because he first loved us." A child gives love to his parents as a response to love and care that they initially provide.

James is making the point that because God has willed to save us and give us new life and a holy nature, it is absolutely incongruous that He would ever lead us into sin.

b) 1 John 3:1--God predestinated us in love, giving us new life that we might have eternal fellowship with Him. He longs for us to be in His presence when He will further transform us into the image of His Son and pour out eternal blessing on us. It is no wonder John says, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God." No adjective could express that indescribable privilege.

The phrase "of His own will" is a translation of the aorist participle boul[ma]etheis, implying that regeneration is not just a wish on God's part, but an active expression of His will. It is totally unlike our concept of wishing for

something that may or may not happen. God's desires always fulfilled in accordance with His will because He has the power to bring them to pass.

III. THE MEANS OF REGENERATION

A. Stated

James 1:18 tells us that God begot us "with the word of truth." That refers to the Word of God, or Scripture. God regenerates us, cleansing us and giving us a new inner person, through the power of His Word. If people don't hear the message of salvation, then they can't be saved.

B. Supported

1. 1 Thessalonians 2:13--Paul commended the Thessalonians for how they responded to the preaching of God's Word: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it, not as the word of men but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." The Word works in conjunction with a believing heart. Salvation takes place when God sovereignly moves to redeem a person who responds to His Word with faith.

2. Titus 3:5--"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit works together with the Word in bringing a person to the point of salvation.

C. Specified

Salvation isn't the result of performing religious duties or trying to obey God in the flesh; it's the result of receiving the Word of truth. That particular phrase is used several times in the New Testament.

1. 2 Corinthians 6:7--"The word of truth, by the power of God" (emphasis added).

2. Colossians 1:5--"Of which ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel" (emphasis added).

3. 2 Timothy 2:15--Those who teach the Bible need to be "rightly dividing the word of truth" (emphasis added).

The word of truth is not only a general revelation of God's Word that reveals His Person and His will to us, but also the more specific revelation of the gospel--the good news that Jesus came, died, and rose again to forgive sin and reconcile us to God.

People are saved when God sovereignly gives them a new nature, washing away their sin, and planting His Spirit in them when they are prompted to respond in faith to the gospel.

IV. THE PURPOSE OF REGENERATION

A. Identified

You may have wondered why God bothered to save men. Verse 18 tells us it was so "we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." That phrase using the Greek particle eis with the verb "to be" is a purpose clause, indicating that God saved us for the purpose of producing a new kind of creation.

B. Illustrated

To understand the term "first fruits" we need to study Old Testament passages like Exodus 23:19, Leviticus 23:9-14, and Deuteronomy 18:4 and 26:1-19. When an Israelite planted a crop, God expected the firstfruits of the harvest, meaning two things: the firstfruits to be harvested and the best fruits available. That demonstrated that an Israelite was to live by faith for when the farmer took the first portion of his harvest and willingly gave it to the Lord, he would be trusting that the Lord would provide more. The natural tendency might be to hoard them in case nothing else came through.

The world will not continue the way it is right now. It is headed for a total transformation. The Bible tells us that the Lord will recreate this earth to His own liking, making a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:10-13). There is coming a whole new creation and believers in this age are just the first evidence of it.

In Romans 8 Paul says that the world doesn't even know what we're going to be yet because we're still veiled in our flesh and waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God, when it will become clear what we really are (vv. 19-23). It is exciting to me know that as a Christian I am a prototype of what's coming--the first sample of God's new creation. As the firstfruits we're the promise of the full crop, so are we the promise of God's recreation yet in the future. Paul says that "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain And not only they, but ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, that is, the redemption of our body" (vv. 22-23). We're not groaning for the recreation of our souls--that's been done already--but for that of our bodies, which is where our fleshly nature resides. This new life we have in Christ is a taste of future glory when the whole universe will be recreated. What a marvelous privilege is ours!

Regeneration is a sovereign act of God. He mixes our faith in His Word with His sovereign power to transform us. We are living examples of where this world is headed when He recreates it. James is reaffirming that God does not tempt us to sin. He is never pleased with our sin. Rather He created us to be a model of a sinless society. So when we sin, we must never blame Him. We should put the blame where it belongs: on our flesh, longing for the day when it will be redeemed along with our souls.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is necessary for man to have a relationship with God? Support your answer

with Scripture (see p. 1).

2. What fact are most people oblivious to? What do the few who aren't oblivious do (see p. 1)?

3. What happens when men divert themselves from the path that God ordained for righteousness (see p. 2)?

4. What does Romans 3:9-18 reveal mankind's standing before God to be? Rather than justifying man, what does God's law do (Rom. 3:19-20; see p. 2)?

5. Why does James introduce the subject of regeneration in verse 18 of chapter 1 (see p. 2)?

6. Can man resolve to work his way out of his spiritual deadness? Explain the kind of change that man needs to enter into a right relationship with God (see p. 3).

7. Why doesn't an unbeliever understand or accept "the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:14; see p. 3)?

8. When we were "dead in sins" (Eph. 2:5-6) what did God do for us (see p. 3-4)

9. Although he was one of the prominent religious teachers in Israel, what did Nicodemus recognize about Jesus (John 3:1-2; see p. 4)?

10. According to Jesus, what is the only way that a person can enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:3; see p. 4)?

11. Explain what Jesus meant by being born of water and the Spirit (see p. 5).

12. Why did Jesus compare the Spirit's saving work to the wind (see p. 5)?

13. From God's standpoint, what is salvation (see p. 5)?

14. What does the phrase "of his own will begot he us" (v. 18) tell us that man needs (see p. 6)?

15. Although the actual act of salvation is imperceptible to others, how it is manifested (see p. 6)?

16. Regeneration results from the _____ of the Giver, not the _____ of the receiver (see p. 7).

17. Why should God get all the credit when people are saved (see p. 7)?

18. Although we exercise our wills in receiving Christ, whose will ultimately brings about our spiritual rebirth (John 1:12-13; see p. 7)?

19. What should be our response to God's gracious love? Support your answer with Scripture (see p. 7).

20. Identify the means God uses in regeneration and cite a Bible reference (see p. 8).

21. Identify and explain the purpose of regeneration according to James 1:18 (see p. 9).

22. How does God's purpose make it inconceivable that He would lead us into sin (see p. 10)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Although it may seem like salvation is all God's work, God has in His wisdom included us in the process. The channel through the gospel is heard is other men and women. Roman 10:13-15 says, "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (NASB). Our responsibility is not to save others; it is to proclaim the gospel and let the Spirit of God do His saving work as He sovereignly chooses. Ask God daily for opportunities to share the Word of truth with relatives, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, and follow Paul's example by doing all you can to lead others to Christ.

2. Consider the privilege we have as Christians in being the firstfruits of God's new creation, and thank God for it. Pray that you might shine in the world as a light of truth and hope. Make sure that others see your attitude of gratefulness to God so that they might desire to have the new life and joy that you have been given. If you have blamed God for your sin, confess that to Him, seeking to live a life of holiness in the power of His Spirit. Meditate on Paul's words: "Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil. 2:15-16, NASB).

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