

DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit's Role in Conversion and Regeneration

Lesson #12

There are many doctrines of the Holy Spirit, which come together in the conversion and regeneration of sinners. The Holy Spirit is present throughout the process, but the question we want to ask is how? In this lesson we will look at the Holy Spirit's role in salvation. We will try to navigate over new territory and not cover what we have already studied in previous lessons. By comparing the Scriptures with what we learned so far, we will see that the Holy Spirit plays a very active part in the conversion and regeneration of sinners who place their faith in Christ.

I. DEFINING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN CONVERSION

- A. Billy Graham in *The Holy Spirit*: "When a person is born again, the process is uncomplicated from the divine perspective. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and makes the child of God. We are born again through the operation of the Holy Spirit, who in turn uses the divinely inspired Word of God. God's Spirit brings life to men. At this point the Holy Spirit indwells a person for life. He receives *eternal* life."¹
- B. R. C. Sproul in *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*: "To be "born again" is to experience a second genesis. It is a new beginning, a fresh start in life. When something is started, we say that it is generated. If it is started again, it is regenerated. The Greek verb . . . translated as "generate" means "to be," "to become," or "to happen." Regeneration by the Holy Spirit is a change. It is a radical change into a new kind of being. To be regenerated does not mean that we are changed from a human being into a divine being. It does mean that we are changed from spiritual dead human beings into spiritually alive human beings."²
- C. John Owen in *The Holy Spirit*: "Regeneration consists in a new, spiritual, supernatural, vital principle, or habit of grace infused into the soul, the mind, the will, and the affections, by the power of the Holy Spirit, disposing and enabling them in whom it is, unto spiritual, supernatural, vital actings and spiritual obedience."³

II. PARADOXES AND THINGS TO PONDER CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN CONVERSION

- A. There has been quite a bit of debate about the Holy Spirit's role in conversion. Specifically the Holy Spirit's role in regeneration and illumination. The Bible teaches that an unbeliever cannot understand the things of God because he is

¹Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit*, pg. 58.

²R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*, pg. 93.

³John Owen from A. W. Pink's work, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 49.

spiritually dead, and that the Scriptures can only be interpreted by the Spirit (**I Cor. 2:10-15; Eph. 2:1-3**). Yet, how is it that an unbeliever comes to understand the gospel and place his faith in Jesus Christ if he doesn't have the Holy Spirit and therefore cannot understand the Word of God? He doesn't receive the indwelling Holy Spirit until after his conversion. How is it that he seeks God, if there are none who seek after God apart from the Holy Spirit (**Rom. 3:10-18**)? Such questions have moved some to conclude that regeneration happens before salvation. Of course that would mean for a short time unbelievers are unsaved but regenerated. This would be like saying they are spiritually alive dead people. Others argue that you first rationally understand the gospel, then place your faith in it, and then are saved and regenerated after receiving the Holy Spirit. But that can't be true either since you cannot understand the gospel, nor do you seek God apart from the Holy Spirit's work. It seems best to conclude understand the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of the elect, before they believe, illuminating them to the truth, drawing them to Christ, and bringing them to the place of saving faith, apart from their being saved and regenerated into new creatures in Christ.

- B. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* has some very good things to say about the Holy Spirit's work in the salvation of Old and New Testament saints:

"We read about godly men and women in the OT, but we catch few glimpses of conversions. Jacob's life was so changed by his encounter with God in his wrestling match at the brook Jabbok (**Gen 32:22-32**) that it can be regarded as a conversion story. The call and obedience of Abraham to leave his father's house and religion constituted a change of life so radical as to be a conversion—a change of direction, with a drastic new ritual of circumcision as the accompanying sign (**Gen 17**). Thereafter, those who wished to become Jewish proselytes and accept the God of Abraham were also circumcised. Circumcision was thus the OT symbol for conversion to a belief in God, signifying the accompanying dramatic change in the individual's life.

Other OT examples of conversion involved not only a change in the individual's religion but a change in culture and lifestyle as well. Rahab is the first recorded proselyte. According to Hebrews, the necessary factor was that she had faith, which she demonstrated by calling the Hebrew God "God in heaven above and on earth below" (**Josh 2:11** NRSV; cf. **Heb 11:31**). Because she acted on her confession by hiding the spies, she and her family were saved and became a part of the nation of Israel. Another OT convert was Ruth, who abandoned her own people and gods to follow her mother-in-law from her native Moab to Israel. In her statement of faith she declared, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (**Ruth 1:16** NRSV). Thus Ruth too believed God and converted to the Hebrew religion.

The OT also contains stories of foreign rulers or peoples who believed God or who repented from their sins for his sake, but who are not cited as converting

to Judaism. . . the people of Nineveh, . . . King Darius of Persia, . . . King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. . .

The NT contains a far more vivid picture of conversion. The chief symbol of conversion is baptism. Such a symbol is two-fold, for it is at once the literal baptism in water that Jesus called for in the Great Commission and also the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is the seal of the new believer's faith and salvation (**Mt 28:19; Eph 1:3**). In addition to this symbol Jesus refers to conversion in symbolic illustrative language. He calls it being born again of water and the Holy Spirit (**Jn 3:5**), moving from darkness to light (**Jn 3:21**), drinking from the living water that is himself and having rivers of living water flowing from the believer's own heart (**Jn 7:38**), and moving from death into life (**Jn 11:25**). In addition he illustrates conversion with the parable of the sower, claiming that those who believe are like the good soil in which the seeds grow successfully (**Lk 8:5-15**). This bearing of fruit is illustrative of those who "when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance" (**Lk 8:15** NRSV)

The most paradigmatic conversion story in the Bible is that of Paul (**Acts 9:1-22; 22:1-16**)—a story so famous that to this day we speak of a "Damascus road experience" as a metaphor for sudden conversion. At its core it is a story of a person's life totally reversed—from a zeal to persecute Christians to a zeal to preach the gospel. The imagery of the conversion itself highlights its dramatic nature, with a flashing light that blinded Paul, a falling to the ground in submission, a miraculous accusing voice from heaven, temporary blindness, a speechless group of onlookers and the subsequent falling of scales from the eyes of the convert. The immediate result is boldness in proclaiming Jesus. The essential motifs stand silhouetted: a personal and overpowering encounter with Christ, submission to God, a casting off of something (picturing as losing a weight or impediment), senses heightened, vision restored, the washing of baptism to symbolize cleansing from sin, and a new lifestyle and values.

Although the most radical conversion story is that of Paul, many other examples of conversion appear in the NT. Among them are Cornelius, the first Gentile convert (**Acts 10**); the jailer converted by Paul and Silas (**Acts 16:13**); Zacchaeus, the tax-collector (**Lk 19:1-10**); the thief on the cross next to Jesus (**Lk 23:39-43**); and the many people, both Jews and Gentiles, converted at Pentecost and subsequently (**Acts 2:38-41**). Some of these converts believed directly because of Jesus' words and miracles, and others believed because of the apostles' words. Yet one of their common bonds was that they were often the most unlikely to have been saved. Often they were Gentiles who had never heard of the God of Israel or sinners whose actions were obvious and repulsive to those around them. As John comments, very few of the righteous Pharisees believed in Christ (**Jn 7:48**). Thus the essential element in each of these converts appears to have been a willingness to

recognize sinfulness, to abandon all past beliefs and to believe the gospel in its entirety.⁴

III. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN CONVERSION

A. Promised in the Old Testament

1. **Isa. 44:3-5** -- "For I will pour out water on the thirsty land And streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring And My blessing on your descendants; 4 And they will spring up among the grass Like poplars by streams of water.' 5 "This one will say, 'I am the Lord's'; And that one will call on the name of Jacob; And another will write on his hand, 'Belonging to the Lord,' And will name Israel's name with honor."
2. **Isa. 59:21** -- "As for Me, this is My covenant with them," says the Lord: "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring," says the Lord, "from now and forever."
3. **Ezek. 36:24-29** -- "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; . . ."
4. **Ezek. 37:1-14** -- "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. 2 He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, You know." 4 Again He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' 5 "Thus says the Lord God to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. 6 'I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord.' "
7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the

⁴Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), 164.

breath, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life." ' ' 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

11 Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' 12 "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 "Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. 14 "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it," declares the Lord."

B. Being Drawn By The Spirit

1. **John 6:44, 65** -- "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. . ." 65 "And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."
2. **John 12:32** -- "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."⁵

"During one of our London Crusades, a Russian nobleman came one evening. He spoke no English. Yet when the invitation was given to receive Christ, he responded. The trained Russian-speaking counselor asked him how, knowing no English, he had understood enough of the message to respond so intelligently. "When I entered this place," the nobleman replied, "I was overwhelmed with a longing for God. Tell me, how can I find him?" (Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit*, pg. 50.)

C. Being Illumined By The Spirit

1. **Prov. 1:23** -- "Turn to my reproof, Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.
2. **Luke 24:44-45** -- "Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,
3. **Acts 16:14** -- "A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."

⁵It might be noted that neither of the verses in this section mention the Holy Spirit explicitly. However, the act of "drawing" a sinner to Christ, literally – to pull, tug, or force like a stubborn mule, is certainly in line with the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is portrayed in Scriptures as supplying the force or power to move sinners towards Christ.

4. **I Cor. 2:12** – “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.”

D. **Being Convicted By The Word And The Spirit**

1. **Acts 5:30-33** -- “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. 31 “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32 “And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.” 33 But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them.”
2. **Acts 7:51-57** -- “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.” 54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.”
3. **I Thess. 1:5** -- “for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”

E. **Being born again by the Spirit**

1. **John 3:1-8** “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 "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."

2. **I Pet. 1:22-23** -- "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, 23 for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God."

F. **Being Regenerated By The Spirit**

1. **II Cor. 5:17** -- "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."
2. **Eph. 2:1-5** -- "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), . . ."
3. **Titus 3:5** -- "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, . . ."
4. **James 1:18** -- In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

IV. **APPLICATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN CONVERSION**

- A. You need to be saved by the work of the Holy Spirit. You can only be saved by the Holy spirit's work in your life in conjunction with the Word of God to draw you, convict you, grant you understanding, grant you repentance, grant you grace, grant you faith, grant you mercy, open your heart to the gospel, cause you to be born again, and regenerate you into a new creature. This work is only evident by a transformed life, the visual fruit of the Spirit, the invisible transformed heart, and a sustained walk with God.

- B. When we evangelize the lost we must always rely on the Holy Spirit's power to convert them, not trust in our own power.
- C. We can be comforted and assured in our salvation and the salvation of others when we progressively see to a greater and greater degree the fruit of the Spirit, increased righteousness, and transformation into Christ's likeness.