Was There Regeneration in the Old Testament?

Isaiah 57:15; Ephesians 2:1

A S ONE THEOLOGIAN PUTS THE MATTER, "Regeneration is a particularly problematic issue with regard to Old Testament believers."[1] Some teachers insist that because regeneration is an act of the Holy Spirit, and because the Holy Spirit would not be given until Pentecost, it therefore follows that regeneration was not at work in the Old Testament.

One problem with this view, it seems to me, is that it assumes that *regeneration* is inseparably linked with *indwelling*. In other words, it assumes that the only way the Holy Spirit can regenerate is if He also indwells (Jn. 14:16–20; Rom. 8:9, 11, 23; 1 Cor. 6:19; 1 Jn. 4:13).

This also assumes that the Holy Spirit never indwelt Old Testament believers, but in some cases it appears He did. David cried, "Take not thy holy spirit from me" (Ps. 51:11), indicating the Holy Spirit's presence in him. "The Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul" (1 Sam. 16:14), indicating that the Holy Spirit had to be there before He could depart. While some teachers argue here that the Holy Spirit didn't actually dwell within, rather exerted an external influence, that doesn't seem to agree with the language.

So, while the Holy Spirit never leaves the New Testament believer—He abides with us *forever* (Jn. 14:16), and the absence of His presence indicates a lost condition (Rom. 8:9)—there was that danger for the Old Testament believer. In the final analysis, the difference between the Holy Spirit's indwelling in the Old and New Testaments is one of degree. We must conclude, then, that regeneration and indwelling are distinct and not inseparable.

I wonder, however, if the real problem here is that the doctrine of regeneration itself is not fully understood by many believers. (This complements our December 2008 issue, which deals with the result of salvation being a new creation, 2 Cor. 5:17.) Let us, therefore, first take a brief look at the doctrine of regeneration and then see how it applies to the Old Testament.

What Is Regeneration?

Like that wondrous word *charis* ("grace"), the Greek word behind "regeneration" (*paliggenesia*) is one of those ancient Greek words transformed by New Testament usage into something far deeper than it was before. It is a compound comprised of *palin*, "again," and *genesis*, "birth, origin." It, therefore, meant a restoration, return to former circumstances, or revivification. The Stoics believed that the earth would periodically perish through some conflagration, so they used this word to refer to "when the earth awakened in the blossoming of springtime from its winter sleep and revived from its winter death." Philo, the first-century Jewish philosopher, often used it to refer to the world emerging out of fire in a phoenix-like resurrection, a belief also held by the Stoics. Even of Noah and his family, Philo wrote, "They became leaders of a *paliggenesia* and chiefs of a second cycle."[2]

It's significant, then, that this word is used twice in the New Testament to refer to a *real* rebirth. It appears first in Matthew 19:28, where our Lord Himself says, "Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The context, of course, is our Lord's teaching concerning future events, so He refers to

the "regeneration," the "restoration," the "re-creation," of the world that will take place after His Second Coming. Many creationists and Bible teachers believe that this will be a restoration of the primeval perfections of the earth before the Genesis Flood. In stark contrast to pagan belief, this will be a true rebirth of the original world by the One True God Who created it. As Acts 3:21 also declares, "Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began."

The other occurrence of *paliggenesia* is in 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 Ghost." As God can restore a fallen world, He also restores those who were once spiritually *alive* and then *dead* in Adam (1 Cor. 15:22; Rom.5:17) to a *new life* in Christ (Rom. 6:4).

What, then, is regeneration? One theologian offers this excellent definition:

> Regeneration is the Holy Spirit's gracious sovereign, quickening act, in which the divine life and nature is imparted to the soul of man, causing a reversal of his attitude toward God and sin, the expression of which, in repentance and faith, is secured through the instrumentality of the Word of God.[3]

This doctrine has been variously described as: the new birth (Jn. 3:3–7; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23), a spiritual quickening or resurrection (Jn. 5:21, 25; Eph. 2:1, 10), the impartation of a new life (2 Pet. 1:4), a spiritual translation (Col. 1:13), and a transformed life (2 Cor. 5:17).

Why Is Regeneration Necessary?

We would submit that this question is, in fact, the heart of the whole matter. At the root of today's misunderstanding of salvation in general, and the Doctrines of Grace in particular, is that we do not recognize man's spiritual state before God regenerates him. What is that state? He is ***dead in trespasses and sins*** (Eph. 2:1, emphasis added; cf. 5:14; Jn. 5:21; 2 Cor. 5:14; 1 Jn. 3:14).

The Greek for **dead** here is *nekros*, which literally speaks of a dead body, a corpse, as in James 2:26, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works [as evidence] is dead also." Before God regenerates a man, he is quite literally *a spiritual corpse*; his spirit is separated from God. Paul doesn't mean the man "looked dead" or was "in danger of death" or "standing on the precipice of death," or "looking death in the eye," but was really ***dead***. As Scottish commentator John Eadie put it, it's a case of "death walking."[4]

So important is this truth that Eadie goes on to point out that **dead in trespasses and sins** implies three things.

First, it implies *previous life*, since to die one had to first be alive. When was man alive? In Adam, of course. But when Adam sinned, the entire race died spiritually.

"For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). The distinction before and after Christ is clear and dramatic.

Second, it implies *insensibility*. Man is unaffected by anything spiritual. He feels nothing. He shrugs his shoulders at even the thought of the blessings of holiness or the threat of hell.

Third, and most significant of all, it implies *inability*. One of the basic controversies today about salvation is the biblical doctrine of man's inability. While controversy has raged for years about the doctrine of *election*, most people don't realize that the real issue is the doctrine of *depravity*, which is what makes election necessary. Most people simply do not (or will not) comprehend (or recognize) the depth of man's depravity. Why? Because they don't take the words of Scripture literally. Some argue that man has a certain "spark of divinity," "glimmer of goodness," or "residual free will," which if properly motivated will produce salvation. But the Word of God is clear: man's will has been so affected by sin that he has lost all will or ability to any spiritual good. Why? *Because he is **dead***. As Eadie again illustrates, "The corpse cannot raise himself from the tomb and come back to the scenes and society of the living world."

To illustrate, can a drowned man who has taken water into his lungs help himself? Can he sit up and say, "Oh, I'm not completely helpless. I have water in my lungs, but I'll be okay in a minute." Of course not. He is totally helpless, totally unable to give himself CPR. Likewise, the spiritually dead man can do nothing to resuscitate himself spiritually. He can do nothing righteous, nothing good, nothing to please God, and is in himself incapable of believing.

We can further illustrate by picturing a cadaver. Medical students can do anything to a cadaver that they want and that cadaver does not respond in any way. It is dead to any physical stimulus. Likewise, apart from Christ we were "spiritual cadavers." We could not respond to any spiritual stimulus. We were not "sick in a fever,"[5] "incapacitated," or even "hopelessly crippled" by sin. We were ***dead***.

One commentator recounts an analogy that has been used many times to describe man's problem:

> Fallen man is so overcome by the power of sin, that he is like a person on his deathbed, who has no physical power left to save himself. If he is going to be healed he can't possibly do it through his own strength. The only way he can be made well would be if the physician gave him the medicine that is necessary to restore him. But the man is so desperately ill that he doesn't even have the power to reach out and take the medicine for himself. So the nurse approaches his bed, opens the bottle of medicine, pours it into a spoon, and then moves it over the dying man's lips. But he must, by his own power, his own

will and his own initiative, open his mouth to receive the medicine.[6]

But if we take Scripture precisely how it reads, this analogy is false. A dead man isn't on his deathbed—he's already *dead*. He not only can't reach for the medicine, he can't even open his mouth to receive it if someone holds it to his lips. Taken to its final implication, in fact, that analogy says that the man must do something for himself to be saved. But that violates the whole concept of grace, which says that God alone has done it all. Does man believe? Yes, but as Ephesians 2:8–9 go on to declare, God even gives us the faith to believe (cf. Jn. 1:12; 6:65; Acts 18:27; Phil. 1:29; see TOTT #15), something we could never have done, or even been *inclined* to do, without His intervention. Why? Because we were *dead*, not just critically ill, not just gasping our last breath, not experiencing that final death rattle, but *dead*.

Still another analogy, which I've heard at evangelistic crusades, goes like this: "Picture a drowning man. He's struggling to stay afloat. He's already gone down twice and is now going down for the third time, with only his desperately seeking hand still above the surface. His only hope is for someone to throw him a life preserver. That's what God does, but even if the preserver hits the man's hand, that's not enough. The man must close his hand around it and capture his salvation."

That's certainly dramatic and plays very well in the evangelist's emotional appeal, but it's unbiblical. Is the lost person *drowning*? No! He's *dead*. He is as entombed at the bottom of the sea as are the over 1,100 men still entombed in the USS Arizona at the bottom of Pearl Harbor. His only hope is for God to reach down, pull his corpse to the surface, and breathe life into him, that is, *regenerate him*.

Pastor and commentator Ray Stedman quite graphically recounts how this truth was brought home to a friend of his. Stedman's friend was given an after-hours tour of a funeral home by a mortician friend, who took him into a room where several bodies were laid out on slabs. The mortician pulled back a sheet to reveal one of the bodies and said to his guest, "Tell him about Jesus." Needless to say, it was something the man never forgot, for that is exactly what the lost man is, dead and absolutely incapable of responding.[7]

Our Lord Himself cut to the heart of the matter when He declared, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" and "therefore . . . no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father" (Jn. 6:44, 65).

In sad contrast, popular teaching says that man is "free," that is, totally free in the sense that he can choose good from evil in the same way Adam was free to choose, but as noted earlier, "in Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22). The term "free will," in fact, has become, in the words of John

Owen, an "idol."[8] This term is a symbol of man's arrogance in thinking that He can, in and of himself, choose God when Scripture and history prove that he always chooses sin and always runs from God.

It is fascinating, indeed, that the issue of "free will" was the crux of the whole Reformation debate, as seen in the story of Luther and Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) was a Dutch humanist and theologian. While ordained a priest in 1492, it seems that he never actively worked as a priest and, like Luther, criticized some of the Church's excesses. He and Luther respected one another, but they had a fundamental disagreement over the human will. In 1524, Erasmus published his book *The Freedom of the Will*, which dealt with the issue of grace, but from a subtle, roundabout way. He chose to make the biggest issue of all the question of "free will," that is, how much impact sin had (or did *not* have) on man's will. He wrote, "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them."[9] In other words, man has voluntary or free power in and of himself to choose the way which leads to salvation apart from God's grace (the same basic heresy Pelagius taught 1,000 years earlier). In Erasmus' mind, then, God and man work together to bring man's salvation.

Luther responded to Erasmus by publishing his most famous work, *The Bondage of the Will*, in 1525. Amazingly, while disagreeing with virtually everything Erasmus wrote, Luther actually commended Erasmus for recognizing the core issue separating Rome and true, pure Christianity. He wrote, in fact, that

> unlike all the rest, you alone have attacked the real thing, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like . . . you and you alone have seen the hinge upon which it all turns, and aimed for the vital spot. For that I heartily thank you.[10]

Erasmus was not so foolish as to defend any of the major points, for they are indefensible. Rather, he pointed out "the hinge upon which it all turns." The issue of "free will" to Luther was the crux of the whole thing. Is Christianity a religion of *pure* grace or *partial* grace, that is, either *all* of God or *partly* of God coupled with man's aid. Did God simply supply the grace and man in his own power supply the faith, or did God supply it all?

Is Regeneration in the Old Testament?

Again, I believe the above answers the whole matter of regeneration. While the above focuses on the New Testament development of this doctrine, we also find it in Old Testament thought.

This is true of many doctrines, in fact. Most New Testament doctrines have their basis in Old Testament theol-

ogy. From sin, to salvation, to service, the New Testament is *enfolded* in the Old, while the Old is *unfolded* in the New. Or as Augustine put it, "The New is in the Old *contained*, the Old is in the New *explained*." While some theological truths (such as the Church) are foreign to the Old Testament, most New Testament subjects are rooted in the Old. These include such doctrines as: the nature of God, creation, man, morality, sin, redemption, worship, wisdom, truth, and many more. This also includes regeneration, at least in "seed form," if we may coin the term, which then comes to full bloom in the New Testament.

Therefore, has man's need changed from the Old Testament to the New? Is his spiritual state different in one over the other? Most importantly, is he regenerated in the New but left **dead** in the Old? While some teachers insist that Old Testament believers will be regenerated when they are resurrected and not before, this is foreign to Scripture. Some cite Daniel 12:2 as "proof," but it doesn't say that. It says, "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Clearly, this refers to resurrection not regeneration. While Old Testament believers will be resurrected to "everlasting life" (cf. Matt 19:29; Gal 6:8; etc.), unbelievers will be resurrected to "everlasting contempt."

This brings us to our second text, Isaiah 57:15: **For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.**

The word **revive** translates the Hebrew *chāyâ*, which appears about 270 times in the Old Testament and means to live, be alive, remain alive. The word is used often to indicate something going on in one who is already a believer.

In the Psalms, for example, especially 119, *chāyā* is often rendered "quicken" or "quickened" in the AV. In 119:25, David prays, "Quicken thou me according to thy word." The idea here is reviving someone from sickness, discouragement, or despair, which only God can do. It will not come from self-determination, will power, psychological technique, or clever cliché. It will come only from God's Word working in the heart and mind. Further, as *chāyā* is used in several ways—to show that an object is safe (Num. 14:38), to indicate that something is reviving (Ezek. 37:5), and to demonstrate that something is flourishing (Ps. 22:26)—the Word of God, therefore, *brings* life, *sustains* life, and *is* our life.

Hebrew authorities point out, however, that *chāyā* is also used to mean "to cause to live." W. E. Vine writes of our text, "This word may also mean 'to bring to life or 'to cause to live.'"[11] Another classic lexicon also has "be restored to life."[12]

We also read twice in Ezekiel of God's promise to replace the "stony heart" with "a new heart" that is made "of flesh" (11:19–20; 36:25–26). Does that not sound like regeneration and transformation? Of Saul we also read that "the Spirit of the LORD" came upon him and "gave him another heart" (1 Sam. 10:6, 9).

While I unapologetically confess to being a classic dispensationalist—recognizing a distinction between Israel and the Church—it is troubling to conclude that the Holy Spirit did not have to regenerate a spiritually dead creature in the Old Testament because of some supposed dispensational difference. If God did not regenerate hearts in the Old Testament, every Old Testament character is still dead. No, the doctrine of regeneration is not *fully developed* in the Old Testament, but we submit that it most certainly is *functionally declared*.

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NOTES
[1] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Baker Books, 1983, 1998), p. 992.
[2] Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000 reprint), p. 75.
[3] Emory Bancroft, *Elemental Theology*, Third Edition (Zondervan, 1960), p. 196.
[4] John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998; reprint of 2nd Edition, 1861), pp. 120-121.
[5] Bishop Alford; cited in Eadie, p. 119.
[6] R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Christian Focus Publications, 1994), p. 46.
[7] Ray Stedman, *Our Riches in Christ* (Discovery House Publishers, 1998), p. 75.
[8] John Owen, *A Display of Arminianism* (Still Waters Revival Publishers, 1989 reprint), p. 12.
[9] E. Gordon Rupp, P. Watson, *Luther And Erasmus: Free Will And Salvation* (Westminster Press, 1969), p. 47.
[10] Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Fleming H. Revell, 1992), p. 319.
[11] *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (electronic edition), "To Live" entry."
[12] *Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon* (electronic edition), entry for Strong's #2421.

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