

Regeneration and Perseverance

You may have heard a Christian say that he's been "*born-again*." This is a reality known as regeneration. Regeneration, or new birth, is the gracious, free, sovereign work of God which changes a person from being spiritually dead to being alive in Christ. Before a Christian experiences God's work of regeneration in his life, he was spiritually dead and incapable of responding to the Lord, according to Ephesians 2:1-5, "***And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world...But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us...even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).***" And, Romans 8:7-8, "***the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.***" Being spiritually dead renders a person "***not even able***" to respond to God.

Additionally, non-believers (those who are spiritually dead) don't seek God. It's God who seeks the lost, not the other way around. Jesus says in Luke 19:10, "***For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.***" And in John 6:44 Jesus says, "***No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.***" Paul reiterates these truths in Romans 3:11, "***THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD.***" Paul is of course referring to the non-believer, as Christians certainly seek the Lord. So, what are we to make of verses like Jeremiah 29:13, "***You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.***" This behavior shows that this person has indeed been drawn by the Father and is an example of what we read in John 6:44.

At this point, one might ask, "*If non-believers are spiritually dead and incapable of spiritually responding to God, and if they can't seek the Lord unless God draws them to Himself, then where does free will come into play?*" Great question! Free will is not as complete and total as you might think. Free will doesn't mean a non-believer can choose whatever he wants; only that a non-believer is free to choose whatever sin he wants to engage in. Consider what Jesus says in John 8:34, "***Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.***" Can a person in bondage will himself out of bondage? Can a slave simply will himself free? Can a dead person will himself back to life? Of course not. A sinner can't, as an act of the will, become delivered from sin. Those apart from Christ are slaves to sin, in bondage to sin, and spiritually dead. They must be delivered and brought to life by an outside source! The Bible reminds us that it's not by our will that we have freedom or life, as John 1:12-13 says, "***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.***" We are wholly dependent on God, and thankfully God has a plan, which is called regeneration.

In John chapter three, Jesus explains regeneration to a man named Nicodemus, showing him that regeneration is necessary for salvation. John 3:3-6 says, "***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.***" *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?" 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. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'*"

Jesus reiterates the obvious, that all men are born of the flesh. For example, my name is Darin son of Steve. This is my identity having been born of the flesh. It's the earthly nature of who I am. It's also a reality that I

can't undo or relinquish. No matter how great or poor the quality of my relationship with my earthly father, I'll always be Darin son of Steve. It's fixed, it's permanent. I can't "un-flesh" or "un-birth" myself because ***"that which is born of the flesh is flesh."*** We can all understand this.

Jesus spoke of a second type of birth, saying that if one is to enter into the kingdom of heaven, he must be "born-again." Confused, Nicodemus asks, ***"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?"*** Jesus referred to spiritual birth; just as a person is once born of the flesh, likewise a person can be once born of the Spirit. I personally experienced regeneration at the age of six years old, having entrusted myself to Jesus for the forgiveness of my sins. I was changed; ***"born of the Spirit."*** In an instant my old essence was gone and something new had come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Being born-again, I was made new in the Spirit's eternal nature. Just as a plant is of the nature of the seed that produced it, as a seed begets its kind, one born of the Spirit is now spiritual in nature, because, ***"that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."*** This is critical as regeneration makes the soul fit for a spiritual kingdom, because, ***"unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."***

You may have noticed that Jesus mentions the need to be born of both ***"water and the Spirit."*** In this context, water and the Spirit are two words expressing the same thing, albeit one metaphorical and one literal. The Spirit's indwelling and renewal is literal, while water is a metaphor referring to being washed with God's grace, as it is elsewhere metaphorically taught (Ezekiel 36:25). Water here has no reference to baptism.

So, regeneration is a singular one-time event, although many things happen in that single event; forgiveness, salvation (to be rescued), justification (being justified to enter into eternal life by the work of Jesus in one's life), and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As birth brings a new life into the world, so spiritual birth, being ***"born of the spirit"*** brings a new spiritual life into reality.

In both cases, whether born of the flesh or born of the Spirit, the results are permanent. Just as the quality of my relationship with my earthly father can't change my fleshly nature, likewise the quality of my relationship with my heavenly Father can't change the nature of who I am in Christ. This means that while I'm sometimes guilty of wandering or straying in disobedience, fortunately, I can't become "un-born" of the Spirit. God can't change His mind and disown me, I can't relinquish my spiritual reality, nor can Satan snatch it away. That's why it's called eternal life; nothing can bring it to an end. This is known as assurance of salvation. A Christian doesn't have to live in fear, wondering if he's done something so bad which might result in losing his salvation.

So, regeneration is something that God does, not something that I do. This might prompt someone to ask, ***"Where then does faith come in, since man is saved by faith?"*** Great question! While it's true to say that man is saved by faith alone (apart from works), man isn't saved by a faith that is alone. This means that the faith by which I respond to the Lord is not a demonstration of me operating on my own, it's a faith given to me at the time of regeneration, by which I respond back to the Lord. At the time of regeneration, God gives me a free gift of faith. Ephesians 2:8 says, ***"By grace you have been saved through faith; not of yourselves, it's a free gift of God."*** In other words, my faith is a response to what God's initiated, it's not an independent act of my will apart from God. Paul says in Galatians 2:20 that he was spiritually dead, but Christ gave him a living faith. Paul adds, ***"the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith,"*** and he goes on saying that it's not I who live, it's

Christ living in me! Paul's living faith was a free gift of God, and Paul used that free gift to respond back to the Lord. Here's an illustration to this point. Imagine Jesus offers you a concert ticket. He hands you the ticket. You then use that ticket by handing it back to Him for your admission. You contributed nothing to the transaction, you just responded to what He gave you. That's how faith works. A dead person doesn't muster up their own faith, they can only operate in faith when faith is imputed into them.

So, if regeneration is a one and done event in the life of a believer, which renders a person saved, then why does the Bible seem to describe salvation as both an event and a process? The Bible teaches that salvation is something that has been, is still being done, and is also yet to come. Here are examples of what I'm talking about. In all three cases, Paul is speaking to believers when he says, "***you have been saved***" (Ephesians 2:8), "***to us who are being saved***" (1 Corinthians 1:18) and, "***salvation is nearer to us than when we believed***" (Romans 13:11). As a Christian, I'm saved, being saved, and will be saved. Let's unpack these verses.

To start, the Scriptures magnify the fact that a believer is saved (Ephesians 2:8). Once saved, always saved. Therefore, salvation is a reality that a believer can count as something that already took place in his life. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 1:18 states that Christians are being saved. To understand this, let's put the context before us. When we read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, Paul makes it clear that the audience he's addressing are Christians, as these verses are full of this assurance, "***To the church of God...to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.***"

So, when Paul says in verse 18 that the message of the cross is the power of God to those "***who are being saved***," he refers to the ongoing work of God in the life of the believer; those enjoying the state of salvation in it's present tense. In other words, the power of God continues to work effectively in their lives, delivering believers daily from the power of sin. So, salvation has happened in me, and I'm experiencing its transformative power today! But wait, there's more!

I still have a future hope for a salvation that's to come. There's salvation in a future tense, such as said in Romans 13:11, that our salvation "***is nearer***" to us now than "***when we first believed***." This of course refers to the future hope that I anticipate when I'm literally enjoying the presence of the Lord forever in His heavenly kingdom. So, Paul figures, why just speak of salvation in one tense, when one tense only tells part of the story!

God has thought of it all, and has done it all! Regeneration is a work of God where all three persons of the Godhead have a part. It's a work of the Father (1 Peter 1:3), the Son (1 John 2:29), and the Spirit (Titus 3:5). And just as the Godhead works collectively to bring about regeneration in a person, so the triune God works collectively to secure the salvation of each believer; the Father (John 10:29), the Son (John 10:28), the Spirit

(Ephesians 1:13-14, 2 Corinthians 1:21-22) each keeping the believer's salvation secure. So, a believer doesn't maintain his salvation, God keeps it, it's settled!

So, why then do the Scriptures have verses that appear to communicate that one's salvation is dependent on continuing in the faith, or one's perseverance? Here are some examples. Mark 13:13, ***"You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved."*** Colossians 1:22-23, ***"He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach - if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard."*** Hebrews 3:14, ***"For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end."*** If my salvation is secured because of regeneration and the faithful promises of God, then in what sense does my endurance play a role?

When reading verses that speak of continuing, persevering, or holding fast, it would be wrong to conclude that a believer can lose his salvation or that he must maintain his salvation. So, then what is meant when the Bible seems to say that a person might not continue in the faith? This is when a person puts aside Christ, ultimately rejecting Jesus as Lord, turning against truth and never repenting. The apostle John speaks of these kinds of people; those who appeared to be in the body of Christ, but left the flock and became opposed to the truth. We see in 1 John 2:19, ***"They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us."***

John reiterates some important truths here. Mainly, those who don't persevere in faith were never truly in Christ at all! These people may have appeared to be a part of the body of Christ, but just like the pretenders spoken about in John 15, they'll be cut off and thrown into the fire. So, those in 1 John 2:19 who ***"went out from us"*** are those who were never regenerate. Additionally, John states that genuine Christians will persevere! He says, ***"if they had been of us, they would have remained with us."*** So, there's no hint of losing salvation here, just pointing out that regenerate lives will indeed remain, continue, and persevere to the end.

Here's the point – God secures the believer and God ensures that every Christian perseveres. God guarantees it, according to His faithfulness. The Bible clarifies that all who are born again will absolutely meet the condition of perseverance unto salvation. It's God's doing, not the effort of the believer! Here are a number of verses that stress this critical point. Romans 8:30, ***"these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."*** All who are called will be glorified! Not one believer misses out or slips through the cracks.

John 10:26-29, ***"But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*** We have confidence in the fact that both the Father and the Son are working in tandem to secure our salvation. Jesus makes clear not one will be lost, ***"this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day,"*** John 6:39.

1 Corinthians 1:8–9, “[God] **will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**”

2 Corinthians 9:8-10: **“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, “HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER.” Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.”**

Philippians 1:6, **“He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

1 Thessalonians 5:23–24, **“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”**

1 Peter 1:3-5, **“His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”**

Jude 24-25 declares, **“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”** Jesus does the work of making us persevere!

After reading all of these promises about God keeping Christians secure, one might leap to a wrong conclusion and say, *“I guess as a Christian I can relax and coast in my faith, because no matter what, God’s got my back!”* That’s the wrong assumption, and it’s certainly not what the Bible teaches. The Bible is ripe with commands to press on, endure, fight the good fight, run the race as though to win, be a good soldier, be diligent, live with readiness, etc. These commands aren’t given to make us think that one maintains his salvation, but rather to compel believers to see themselves as living with a mission, with purpose, to consider themselves a warrior for Christ at the front lines of the battle. So, to the Christian reading this, press on in faith, persevere as a good soldier fighting a worthy fight!

And take comfort believer, have assurance in your salvation. How do you know you belong with the Lord? Because He came looking for you, you didn’t seek Him out. How do you know God’s going to see you through to the end? Because He initiated all of this in your life, not you. How do you know God’s mission will go forward with success? Because He is sovereign and will bring it to pass.