

## Paradox of Regeneration

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A paradox exists when a phenomenon “exhibits some consequence that is in conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.” This definition from the Oxford English Dictionary fits preconceived notions some may have with regard to the new birth, or regeneration. We are taught those who are born again have joy, peace and comfort and these as a result of obedience toward God which is possible for all who are born again. However, Paul described his experience after new birth to include feelings of wretchedness.

It is suggested by some that after a person is born again they become perfectly obedient to God's will and no longer commit sin. Yet scripture plainly and in great detail indicates otherwise. David's adultery with Bathsheeba and murder of Uriah, Solomon's worship of his wives' idols, Asa's treaty with Syria against Israel, John's lapse in faith when he questioned if Jesus was really the Messiah and Peter rebuking Jesus are all instances of born again believers who committed sin after new birth. Another theory about the effect of new birth is God decreed that after one is born again he will progressively grow in grace as the Lord compels him to persevere in faith in Christ until death; so that all who are truly born again are more spiritually mature at the end of their lives than anytime prior in as much as they repent of every sin they ever committed before dying. While we do not dispute that many, if not most who are born again do seem to grow in grace throughout their lives, we cannot agree that God decreed this as a universal principle of either regeneration or final preservation of the saints. Such a notion flies in the face of scriptural accounts. The final chapter of Lot's life is an account of his sin of incest (Gen 19:30-36). The Book of Jonah ends with the prophet sitting alone in the hot sun, mad at God because the Lord had forgiven the penitent citizens of Ninevah (Jon 4:5-11). The last account of Solomon details his turning away from God to worship the idols of his many wives (1Ki 11:4-42). Asa's last act was to seek help from physicians and not the Lord (2Ch 16:12). In each case scripture is silent as to any indication these saints repented before they died. And since an argument from silence is logically no argument at all, we must conclude there is no evidence to suggest they ever repented of their last acts of sinful behaviors and therefore were not more spiritually mature at death than anytime prior.

Assuredly, regeneration is an occasion for joy. Yet it also causes one to become acutely and painfully aware of the evil of his sins thru guilt as a consequence of committing sins. The Apostle Paul characterized the effect of his own sinning as suffering from a sense of wretchedness, or intense misery. “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom 7:24). He explained the cause of his wretchedness was a warfare in which his fleshly nature was in conflict with his spiritual nature born of God. “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” (Rom 7:18-23). The specific cause of Paul's wretchedness was a conflict between his spiritual will to do good and his fleshly will to

do evil which impeded his mental and physical abilities to understand how to do good and then do it. Paul possessed a perfect will to do good: He delighted in the law of God in his inward (new creature) self. However, he found in relying solely on his own understanding and ability he was unable to overcome the fleshly man's (depraved self) will to do evil. His conclusion was although he wanted to do good, based upon his own understanding and power, evil was not only present, but was dominant. Thus, he asserted that the rule of behavior (law) of his members (fleshly man, depraved self) warred against his will to be godly which was the governing principle of his born again, new creature self; and successfully suppressed its will to have fleshly man actually do God's will. Paul concluded the dominance of his flesh nature to do evil over his inward man, new creature will to have his flesh do good produced his sense of wretchedness, or intense misery as a consequence of guilt for doing evil rather than good.

Paul related this paradoxical phenomenon of wretchedness many years after his new birth. He acknowledged this struggle as a fully committed and seasoned veteran in God's army who was engaged in a daily internal war of wills between his born again, new creature self and his depraved fleshly self. Paul made this argument to refute the idea that external acts of obedience to the tenets of Mosaic Law could produce any sense of true righteousness. His point is that such a notion is based upon a false premise in that his own longtime experience with Law service indicated otherwise. For him, after new birth, the Law worked to demonstrate the nature of sin as exceeding sinful (Rom 7:13). This was not because the Law was unholy; rather, it exposed the sinfulness of man's fleshly or, depraved will through concupiscence. It did so by arousing intense desire in Paul's fleshly self to possess or do what the Law forbade. Paul indicated this is so even after one is born again because although confronted by a new creature will to please God his yet present depraved nature retained its lustful desire to sin. Paul's own experience suggests his depraved nature was neither eliminated nor effectually suppressed simply as a consequence of new birth. Since Paul used his own experience to make this point to other Christians in regard to their motive for Law service and did not qualify or otherwise note exceptions to his argument it is logical to conclude he was asserting this is a principle that applies to all who are born again.

However, Paul did not conclude his teaching with an expression of suffering over the wretchedness of his flesh nature. The whole of Paul's conclusion also includes thankfulness, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin." (Rom 7:23-24). Paul was thankful new birth created in him the desire and ability to faithfully seek the spiritual understanding and power he needed to overcome his fleshly will. By the power of God thru faith in Christ we can know His will and do as He pleases. We like Paul, by faithful obedience can arrive at a place where we thank God through Christ for deliverance to comfort and joy from the sufferings of the wretchedness of the flesh.

It might be suggested asserting a principle in which fleshly self is capable of capturing and subduing our new creature will to do good is a rationalization for sinning. However, Paul indicated this is neither logical nor desirable. He argued it is not logical because we are dead to sin and alive in Christ. "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Rom 6:1-4). Paul's

point is that the life principle of new birth is the same principle of life that raised Christ from the dead. It is therefore unreasonable to pursue the inferior law of sin to which we are now positionally dead as a result of the resurrection of Christ. Furthermore, Paul's own experience presented in Romans 7 indicates the mental and emotional effect of committing sins on those who are born again is extremely unpleasant.

How then can we avoid committing sin? Certainly, Paul is clear we cannot do so with external behaviors alone which merely imitate godliness. (See Rom 7:18-23.) However, if we faithfully endeavor to know and do God's will because we love and want to please Him, and not in order to prove we are righteous or at least more righteous than others, or perhaps to please and gain acceptance from others (these are unfaithful motives), God will show us what is right and how to perform His will in every circumstance. This begins with a commitment in love to understand God's will by hearing the gospel preached, studying his word, prayerfully meditating, and fellowshiping first in our local assembly (Church) and also with others who love the Lord and seek to please Him. It includes love motivated behaviors towards others including good works and enduring with joy the ridicule or dismissal of those who reject God. (We rejoice because we are found worthy to suffer shame for Christ's name; Acts 5:41). All the while we must look for opportunities to share the good news by giving an answer to others for the hope God has given us (1Pet 3:15).

New birth does not exempt God's children from suffering because of sin. Jesus said; "In this world ye shall have tribulation." But this statement was preceded with a promise of peace (Joh 16:33). Agreeing with the Savior's pronouncement, Peter indicated we have a choice as to what kind of suffering we do. "For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing". (1 Pet 3:17). This is the choice: We can suffer from wretchedness as a consequence of doing evil or we can suffer for well doing. If we choose to pursue the lusts of our fleshly selves we can expect to suffer the intense misery of wretchedness until we confess our sin and truly repent. If we through the Spirit faithfully seek to know and do God's will we will likely suffer rejection and persecution from those who reject Christ. However, with this choice the Lord replaces fear with comfort as afflictions push us toward Him. It is a suffering whose pain is swallowed up by Christ's victory at Calvary in which anguish is frustrated by hope and misery overcome by glorious, unspeakable joy. It is an at-peace-with-God kind of suffering that satisfies our souls, comforts our minds and empowers us to "press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." It is the suffering of good and faithful servants in whom the Lord is well pleased.