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NICK GUY, VOLUME 4

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THEME: The work of regeneration, or what happens when someone is born-again?

NOTES: Many times when a man or woman is born again there will be a drastic change in their lives. To those who knew the person prior to their conversion these changes will be attributed to an emotional experience, a work of self-will or even some sort of brain-washing. Certainly, these things can cause, for at least a time, a change in a person, but to the one who has been truly born again, the cause is much more fundamental and much more enduring.

MAN'S GUILT: Everyone who believes in God has a desire to connect with Him. Most who believe in God understand that sin, which comes about due to rebellion against God, keeps that connection from being made. So we must ask: How serious is sin? What are its affects on man? And what is required to remove them? First of all, a correct assessment of the condition of man is necessary to understanding the solution.

Question #1 - Who has sinned? Romans 3:9-18 reads (in part) "None is righteous, no, not one. No one understands, no one seeks after God. All have turned aside, together they have all become worthless. No one does good, no, not even one. There is no fear of God before their eyes."

If this is a true assessment and it applies to all men, then no one stands righteous before God by any merit of his own.

Romans 3:23 tells us that "All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory."

Sin is also universal. Romans 5:12 tells us: "As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death spread to all men, because all men have sinned."

All men are also sinful by birth. Psalm 51:5 tells us: "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."

Question #2 - What are the affects of sin on man? Sin's affect in the life of men is also powerful. Jesus spoke of how men are enslaved by sin (John 8:34). And it keeps men from accepting the things of God. As Paul wrote in I Corinthians 2:14, "The natural man doesn't accept the things of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he can't understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

For instance, a man is free to choose between an apple or a tomato. But he is not free to choose to prefer apples over tomatoes. He does not wake up one morning and decide by his own will to change his preference of apples over tomatoes. Likewise, the natural man is free to choose between accepting the gospel or rejecting it, but he is not

free to choose whether or not the gospel is foolishness to him.

It is plain that due to sin and its power and control over us, no one would respond positively to the gospel. A change of heart needs to take place.

Question #3 - Is it possible for a man to change his own heart? Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:1 that “All men are dead in trespasses and sins.” This death is spiritual. Now, if man is dead, he is unable to give himself life.

Sin power enslaves us and blinds us so much so that when the natural man hears the good news, he is unable to receive it. He may have an intellectual grasp of the facts and doctrines of the Bible, but he lacks the ability to appreciate and delight in them, and has no desire for them.

How serious is this condition? It could be called “total.” This does not mean that all men are equally wicked or that any man is as wicked as he can be, but that sin affects every part of his being.

This does not mean that sinful men are completely destitute of virtue, nor is human nature, in and of itself, sinful. But, because of their sinful state, they are motivated by wrong principles and are wholly unable to love God.

As hard as knowledge of God is to understand and comprehend, it may be that knowledge of ourselves is equally so.

GOD MUST TAKE THE INITIATIVE IN EFFECTING SALVATION: If man is unable and even unwilling to come to God for salvation, then it stands to reason that God must be the initiator of it. Some have argued that the Gospel appeals only to uneducated or simple people, or those who are in a needy state. History does not bear this argument out. Men and women from all walks of life, educated and uneducated, from every part of the emotional spectrum have responded positively to the Gospel.

It isn't education or accomplishments or devotion that causes one's eyes to be opened. It isn't the work of human reason, or argument or debate that brings about a change of heart. It is God, regenerating the soul and making one alive. It is God working in men that causes the gospel to go from being seen as foolishness to being seen as desirable.

Jesus Himself said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father, who sent Me, draws him” (John 6:44). God must draw man to Himself in order for that man to be saved.

WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN REGENERATION: Who has the power to completely transform a man so dramatically and so drastically? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. And He plays a vital part in the work of redemption. Jesus said that after He was gone, He would send the Holy Spirit. “And when He comes,” Jesus said, “He will convict the world concerning sin and

righteousness and judgement” (John 16:8).

In order for a man to accept the gospel, his very nature would have to be changed to where he no longer considers it foolishness. This is what the Holy Spirit does.

The Holy Spirit is a supernatural Being. He is not a part of the natural world, but rather above it. Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life” (John 6:63) It is the special work of the Holy Spirit to convict men of their sin, to reveal Christ to them, to regenerate their soul and to lead them to the exercising of faith and repentance.

Regeneration is a word used to describe what happens to a man or woman when they are transformed by the Holy Spirit. John 3:1-20 records the story of one night when a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, came to Jesus. Jesus told him that unless a man is “born again” he cannot see the kingdom of God. He wasn’t talking about physical birth, but spiritual birth. This is an inward change that all men must undergo if they are ever to see and enter the kingdom of God, and have eternal life .

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of the need to be “born of water and the Spirit.” This undoubtedly refers to Ezekiel 36:25-27, where God is pictured as symbolically cleansing men from their sin by water, replacing their heart of stone and giving them a “new heart” by putting his Spirit within them. The heart of stone means the dead heart that had no feeling for nor responsiveness to spiritual reality.

Regeneration is monergistic. This means that the work of regeneration is entirely the work of God. It is not something that man does, but something that happens to him, and it raises the spiritually dead to new life in Christ. Man’s involvement is to exercise faith, but God’s work of regeneration is the cause of man’s exercising of faith. Through regeneration a man is not merely improved, but changed from spiritual death to spiritual life. It does not cause him to embrace a new religion, but gives him a new life.

NECESSITY OF THE CROSS: What makes all of this possible is the Cross of Jesus. Man can not remove his own sin. Jesus did for man what man was incapable of doing for himself. Man is totally dependant upon God to send His Son Jesus to remove the guilt of sin, conquering both sin and death through His death and resurrection. Man is then dependant upon God to draw him to Himself so that he may be able to recognize his guilt and find delight in and accept the gift of salvation Jesus has secured.

RESOURCES: In his book *Finally Alive*, John Piper presents a great exposition of the work of regeneration. www.desiringgod.org
Also, the works of R.C. Sproul can be highly recommended. www.ligonier.org