

## Spiritual Life vs. Spiritual Death

By Jane Titrud

*“For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”*  
(Romans 8:6 NASB)

In the beginning, God made a covenant of life with Adam. That is, continued life for the man was contingent upon his obedience to the commandment of God not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil: *“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die”* (Genesis 2:16–17). This is the same covenant that was later broken at the time of the fall, and death happened as warned.

Indeed, both Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit. Each, moreover, suffered spiritual death by becoming separated from the life of God and eventually died physically as well. What is more, death spread to all men, even to those who, unlike Adam, had not violated a known requirement or law of God (Romans 5:12).

Yet, the Bible says that sin entered the world through the sin of the man rather than through the sin of the woman or even both of them (Romans 5:18–19; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22). It also reveals that Adam’s sin affected all of mankind in a way that negatively corresponds to the work of Christ on the cross: *“So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so **through one act of righteousness there resulted Justification of life to all men.** For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous”* (Romans 5:18–19, bold emphasis added). *“For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. **For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive**”* (1 Corinthians 15:21–22, bold emphasis added).

Such revelation has led many Bible scholars to believe that Adam held a representative form of headship over all of mankind from the beginning. This would also appear to be the proper foundation upon which to build a true understanding of the gospel.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners by undoing the universal effects of Adam’s sin. Taking on flesh as an innocent child apart from the curse of sin, He was born to die for the sins of the world. This is the ultimate message of Christmas. In the fullness of time, the Savior of the world was born to a virgin. His mission would be to submit to the will of the Father and offer up the righteous sacrifice of Himself, once for all (Hebrews 9:26; 10:12). His death and resurrection would then become the basis for the Gospel of Salvation.

God’s gracious plan of Salvation—His remedy, if you will, for the problem of sin and death—is simply to offer Salvation to all who will believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Everyone has already been justified by the perfect work of Christ, according to what Romans 5:18 says above. It is just that this truth must be accepted by faith. It is of no benefit to the unbeliever. But whenever a person does believe the Gospel, he becomes a child of God, a new creature in Christ, and receives the gift of eternal life.

*“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to 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”* (John 1:12–13). *“Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

Being “born again” is synonymous with becoming a new creature in Christ as well as with the concept of being regenerated. But while this aspect of Salvation is presented in John 1:12–13 (quoted

above) as entirely God's doing and involves a work of the Spirit in the life of a Believer (Titus 3:5), Salvation can only be accomplished in conjunction with faith in God's truth on the part of man (1 Corinthians 1:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). This is true with every aspect of Salvation as well, including being "born again."

What is more, the concept of Salvation by grace through faith did not originate in the New Testament with the teachings of either Jesus or the apostles. Hebrews 11:2 says that, long before the advent of Christ and the Gospel, men of old gained approval before God by their faith. Abraham is listed in this regard in Hebrews 11 along with the examples of many others. The apostle Paul also holds up Abraham elsewhere in the Scriptures as the primary example of one who found righteousness by faith. He is even presented as the spiritual father of all Believers.

*"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.' Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness"* (Romans 4:1–5).

*"Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead"* (Romans 4:23–24).

*"Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'ALL THE NATIONS SHALL BE BLESSED IN YOU.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer"* (Galatians 3:6–9).

According to Paul, Abraham was clearly justified by faith apart from works. We cannot say for certain that Abraham was "born again" in the same sense that Believers in the Gospel are today for there is no specific teaching on this detail in the Bible. Yet, what we are told specifically is that Abraham was justified by his faith in God without the mention of any other prior requirement for the exercise of that faith.

Nevertheless, some theologians have gotten the idea that one must be "born again" or regenerated *before* one can exercise saving faith unto Salvation. Much of this stems from a particular interpretation of what Jesus told Nicodemus when He said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3), as well as what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:14: *"But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."*

The problem here is with a mistaken assumption that these passages are speaking of the need for regeneration *prior to* Salvation. A closer look at context in each case, however, reveals a different story.

In the case of Nicodemus, for instance, one must remember that Jesus was speaking to a Pharisee. Most Pharisees did not understand their need for Salvation. They considered themselves "saved" simply by being physical descendants of Abraham and keepers of the Law, as was typical of most other Jews in that day as well. What Jesus was then implying was that he needed to be truly saved and, thus, become a spiritual child of Abraham by faith. This is what He meant when He told Nicodemus that he needed to be "born again." Only then would he qualify for *entrance* into heaven. For as Jesus said again in verse 6: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"* (John 3:6, bold emphasis added). To "see" oftentimes means to "understand," but in this case, the parallel is "enter into."

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 2:14 (quoted above), the subject here is not the *process* or various *aspects* of Salvation. According to the context, Paul is rather referring to the *benefits* of Salvation:

*“THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE THAT LOVE HIM”* (1 Corinthians 2:9)—things which, consequently, make no sense to unbelievers. These would include such things as being children of God and becoming “born again” (John 1:12–13), being new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), being indwelt by Spirit of Christ (Colossians 1:27), being sons of God by adoption and fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:14–17), being seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6), being overcomers by faith (1 John 5:4), and being joined to the life of Christ (1 John 5:11–12). For truly, how would one go about explaining such things to an unbeliever?

It is important to get the order right because interpreting the need to be “born again” as a necessary precursor for being able to exercise saving faith in the Gospel takes any responsibility for Salvation out of the hands of man and puts it squarely upon God. That is because only God could bring about such spiritual birth. But that is precisely the point. The goal of this thinking is to emphasize the sovereignty of God. Man, on the other hand is viewed as spiritually dead and, thus, he *cannot* respond to the truth. They believe God must supernaturally enable a person to see the truth of the Gospel via His work of regeneration *before* man can believe it, and this God does by His sovereign choice—enabling some to see His truth but not all.

Requiring man to exercise faith unto Salvation is, moreover, thought to involve works righteousness. It has already been shown that saving faith is not equivalent to works, for the faith of Abraham is contrasted with works in Romans 4:1–5. Yet, within the view that faith is all of God and nothing of man, faith is interpreted as a gift of God, supposedly in accordance with Ephesians 2:8–9: *“For by grace, you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”*

However, the key to understanding here is that the gift of God is not referring to faith but rather to God’s entire plan of Salvation. The fact that we are saved by grace through faith is not of man. It is the gift of God to a fallen race, but faith is required to receive the gift. For, looking again at John 1:12–13, one can see that the right to become children of God is dependent upon first receiving Christ by believing in His name: *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to 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”* (John 1:12–13).

God is obviously the One who does the work of regeneration, but He only does this for people who first believe and receive their Savior. Requiring regeneration prior to faith, on the other hand, tends to “put the proverbial cart before the horse.” Since some people equate being “born again” with the process of putting your faith in Christ, the phrase, “you must be born again to be saved” can sound as if one needs to get saved in order to get saved.

God is certainly involved in the saving of souls. For Jesus said, *“No one can come to Me except the Father who sent Me draw him: and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:44). He said that the Holy Spirit would come to convict the world of sin, righteous, and judgment (John 16:8). In addition, the Word of God plays a key role in generating faith (Romans 10:17). God has even chosen to save by preaching the word of the cross in demonstration of the Spirit and power of God instead of persuasive words of human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:17–31; 2:1–5).

*“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and Sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, ‘LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD’”* (1 Corinthians 1:30–31).

Yet, the trouble with seeing God as solely responsible for Salvation without any input on the part of man is that this also tends to make Him responsible for the loss of those who never come to believe the truth. For why would God choose not to bring everyone to saving faith if it were in His power to do so?

One must remember what was said earlier about sin coming into the world through one man. That is, the consequences of Adam’s sin including death passed on to everyone, *“even over those who had*

*not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come*” (Romans 5:14). Man could never bring about such a thing as the universal application of the consequences of Adam’s sin to all of mankind. Obviously, then, this was God’s doing. If He did this to foreshadow the coming work of Christ who would bring Justification of life to all men, as it says in Romans 5: 18, and thereby facilitate His plan of Salvation, then it had a righteous purpose. Justification could then at least be offered to all and effectively applied to everyone who willingly chose to exercise faith in God. But, if God must first regenerate those whom He chooses to save and yet He does not do so for everyone, then He is condemning people to death who have no ability to believe after being the One who transferred the consequences of Adam’s sin onto all of them in the first place. This understanding, consequently, tends to make God out to be the author of sin and death.

What then about the understanding that unregenerate man is spiritually dead and is, thus, incapable of receiving the truth of God until he is “born again” through a supernatural act of God? The trouble here has to do with misunderstanding what it means biblically to be “spiritually dead.”

People often define spiritual death by equating it with physical death, in which case one becomes unresponsive to outside stimuli. However, since life in the spiritual sense is biblically associated with being joined to God, it would seem best to define spiritual death in terms of being separated from the life of God because of sin and unbelief. Such a definition fits the description of what we were like before our own Salvation. Ephesians 2:1 describes us as being *dead in trespasses and sins*. In other words, sin once separated us from the life of God.

The idea that separation from the life of God defines spiritual death coordinates well with Jesus’ parable of the vine and branches in John 15:1–11: *“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned”* (John 15:5-6).

It coordinates well with the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15: 11–32, for the son that left the father was said to be dead. By the same token, coming back to the father is depicted as becoming alive again: *“‘Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ And they began to be merry.... ‘But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found’”* (vv. 23-24; 32).

A similar definition of life—and, by association, death—is also abundantly clear in 1 John 5:11-12: *“And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”*

Even in the case of our spiritual walk of Sanctification, the mind set on the flesh is said to be death whereas the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6). Here again, the issue with the flesh has to do with sin, which separates one from God, and life apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit amounts to death, *“because 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”* (Romans 8:7-8). *“For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God”* (Romans 8:13-14).

The Bible does not present the problem of fallen man as if he were spiritually unresponsive and, thus, unable to react to the preaching of God’s truth by exercising faith. The problem is that he is in bondage to sin and cannot come to God except on God’s terms. Apart from accepting God’s truth, he can also become subject to the lies of false spirituality or become spiritually apathetic. Indeed, one can find a prevalence of people all over the world who are either caught up in some form of false spirituality or else want nothing whatsoever to do with the God of the Bible because they love darkness rather than light (John 3:19).

Moreover, the need to accept Jesus Christ and the Gospel by faith is not some lofty theological concept that only the intellectually gifted can grasp. The basic idea is simple. People know what it

means to believe. Even a child can exercise faith; it just needs to be directed towards the right things. Consequently, Jesus said, *“Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all”* (Mark 10:14b-15).

With respect to those who do not come to saving faith, therefore, it is not because they *cannot* put their faith in Christ without first being “born again.” It is either because they have never been presented with the truth of God’s Word in the first place or because they *will not* accept the Gospel by faith and submit to its truth. And a theology that says otherwise tends to bring sharp and unnecessary division in the Body of Christ.

As Paul told Timothy, the last days will be characterized by people who hold to a form of godliness but have denied its power (2 Timothy 3:5). This should be of primary concern to Christians. While there is still time, therefore, let us be about understanding, preserving, and spreading the simple Gospel in all its power instead of being distracted and divided by the wisdom and teachings of mere men.