

**“But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”**

**—2 Corinthians 3:14–16 (NASB)**

One of the most repeated themes in Scripture is the doctrine of *total depravity*. The Bible leaves no ambiguity in its description of man: he is completely corrupted by sin. This corruption is particularly evident in man’s mind in what theologians call *the noetic effects of sin*. Sin has not only corrupted man’s senses; it has corrupted his faculty of rationality, judgment, and belief. As a result, no man in his natural state can think God’s thoughts after him in any what that is true and pleasing to God. It is utterly impossible for him to love God with all his heart and all his soul and all his mind (see Matt 22:37); the natural has no true desire to do so in the first place. Mankind intuitively suppresses God’s truth—sometimes in outright blasphemy, at other times in deceptive religiosity. As the Apostle Paul states, natural men live life

in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. (Eph 4:17b–19; see also Gen 6:5; Ps 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Rom 1:18–32; 3:10–18; 1 Cor 1:18–31; 2:1–16; 2 Cor 3:14; Titus 1:15 ).

Such a diagnosis renders man entirely *hopeless*. Even when presented with the revelation of God’s good news of redemption, man’s response is always one of rejection. To the natural man, God’s revelation—especially of salvation—is foolish (1 Cor 1:18; 2:14).

But while all hope for man according to his own ability is gone, hope itself has not vanished. It is manifested instead in God’s miraculous work of **regeneration**. What man cannot do for himself God does through the impartation of *new life* to the sinner. This bestowal of life not only encompasses a man’s heart and soul but his mind as well, rendering it both willing and able to think God’s thoughts after him, to love him with his mind. This renewal can be called *the noetic effects of regeneration*.

The “noetic effects of sin” refer to the effects that sin has on man’s *mind*. The “noetic effects of regeneration” refer to the effects that regeneration has on man’s mind.

The study of the doctrine of regeneration involves two features: the *active* component and the *passive* component. Stated differently, the study of regeneration must consider: (1) the *cause* of regeneration (God’s active role); and (2) the *effect* of regeneration (man’s experience of God’s transformative work). In the context of our larger study of “The Christian Mind,” the study of regeneration and its effects on the mind must answer these questions: **(1) What does God do to the mind in regeneration?** and **(2) What do we experience in the mind in regeneration?**

### What God Does to the Mind in Regeneration

An examination of the doctrine of regeneration must start with God’s activity. The noetic effects of sin have left every human being utterly unwilling and unable to apprehend the message of redemption. Thus, God must act on his own free and sovereign initiative if there is to be change.

Stated simply, **“regeneration” is the sovereign, gracious, radical work of God in which he imparts new life into the spiritually dead sinner.** It is a *sovereign* work because it is God alone who accomplishes it (see especially the “new birth” analogy of John 3:1–15, or the “new creature” language of 2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15 or Eph 2:10; people do not birth themselves and creatures do not create themselves). It is a *gracious* work because man in his sinful state never merits new life; new life—eternal life—is always a “gift” (Rom 6:23). And it is a *radical* work in that its enlivening reach into man’s being extends as far as the reach of sin itself.

“Regeneration is, consequently, as all-pervasive as depravity. . . . Regeneration reverses that depravity and is universal in the sense that while the regenerate individual is not yet as holy as he or she might be, there is no part of life which remains uninfluenced by this renewing and cleansing work.”

—Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 122–23

Thus, **the reach of regeneration goes as far as the mind, transforming it from being *unwilling* and *unable* to think God’s thoughts after him (man’s natural state of deadness) to being *willing* and *able* to think God’s thoughts after him, and to do so out of love (man’s new state of life).** John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (*Biblical Doctrine*, 581) describe it as follows:

In regeneration, then, the Spirit opens the blind eyes of the mind (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor 4:4, 6; Eph 1:18), replacing, as it were, the mind of flesh with the mind of the Spirit (Rom 8:5–9)—indeed, with the mind of Christ himself (1 Cor 2:16)—so that the regenerate man appraises all the things that he once could not understand (1 Cor 2:15; cf. 1 John 2:20, 27).

Although regeneration is as all-pervasive in its reach within man as the effects of sin itself, it is noteworthy that Scripture frequently describes regeneration in terms of its *noetic effects*. It does so using vivid imagery.

- a) **The imagery of removing a veil.** The Apostle Paul uses the term “veil” (κάλυμμα, *kalumma*) four times 2 Corinthians 3:12–16. He begins by using the term once in a literal manner to refer to the veil which Moses put over his face after speaking with Yahweh (v. 13; see Exod 34:33–35). He then transitions to use the term three more times in a non-literal sense (vv. 14–16), referring to a figurative “covering that prevents right understanding” (BDAG, 505). Paul then makes the assertion:

But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Cor 3:14–16)

- b) **The imagery of giving sight to the blind.** Emphasizing the noetic effects of regeneration, the prophet Isaiah records the words of Yahweh spoken to his Servant in Isaiah 42:

I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.”

The Apostle Paul uses the same imagery in Acts 26:17–18 to describe the commission he received from the Lord—a commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, a commission that would “open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God . . . .”

- c) **The imagery of enlightenment.** This is the most common image used to describe the noetic effects of regeneration. Paul employs this word picture immediately after his use of the analogy of lifting the veil in 2 Corinthians:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:3–6)

Other references to this enlightenment include Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:12–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; and 1 Peter 2:9. God’s revelation itself is “light” (Ps 36:9; 119:105; Prov 6:23), so the efficacious impact of that revelation on the sinner’s mind in the miracle of regeneration is naturally called “enlightenment.”

- d) **The imagery of instruction.** Another powerful metaphor used to describe God’s act of regeneration and its effects on the mind is that of *teaching* or *instruction*. In the miracle of rebirth, God does not reveal new truth to the sinner in a special revelatory experience akin to those of the prophets. Instead, he takes what

is proclaimed in the gospel message (Rom 10:13–17) and impresses it upon the heart, soul, and mind of the one he regenerates. Jesus referred to this when he stated,

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. (John 6:44–45, citing Isaiah 54:14)

This common metaphor is found also in Ephesians 4:20, 1 Thessalonians 4:9, and 1 John 5:20.

- e) **The imagery of *the new mind*.** In a significant section in which Paul contrasts the mind/wisdom of the natural man with the mind/wisdom of the spiritual man (1 Cor 1:18–2:16), Paul makes this climactic statement:

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. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.”

By making this assertion Paul did not suggest that a “spiritual man” (a regenerated person) has omniscience like the Son of God. He is, however, asserting that the sinner who has come to experience newness of life is able to think in a way analogous to Christ—to contemplate and appreciate true *wisdom*, a wisdom “not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away” (1 Cor 2:6).

“The leading, conducting faculty of the soul is the *mind*, or understanding. Now this is corrupted by the fall, as we have already proved; but in regeneration this depravity is removed, so that we come to see spiritual things in a spiritual manner, that we may savingly know God and his will as revealed in and by Jesus Christ.”

—Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 190

### What We Experience in the Mind in Regeneration

While God is the sole *cause* of regeneration, its effects are certainly experienced since regeneration is a *transformative* act. Regeneration effects *change* in the life and experience of the regenerated sinner, and that change is experienced *in the mind* through two gifts of regeneration: *repentance* and *faith*.

- a) **The experience of *repentance*.** The connection of repentance to one’s thinking is seen vividly in the meaning of the most common NT word used to describe *repentance*: μετανοέω (*metanoēō*, verb) or μετάνοια (*metanoia*, noun)—meaning “to change one’s mind” or “a change of mind.”

Certainly, repentance is not *merely* an intellectual change of perspective, but the mind’s role in repentance is nonetheless foundational. Biblical repentance begins in the mind as sin is recognized and judged truly for what it is. As Matthew Barrett states, “Sorrow and remorse for sin, though essential, are not enough to constitute repentance. Rather, sorrow for sin must be accompanied by a decisive resolve to reject, forsake, renounce, and abandon sin” (*Forty Questions about Salvation*, 177). Paul’s reference to such repentance in 2 Timothy 2:24–25 bears this out:

The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

- b) **The experience of *faith*.** Most people do not equate “faith” with the mind. For them, faith is “a leap into the dark.” It is the reflex of the *heart*, not the *head*. Many define it in ways that are sentimental, sappy, irrational, and self-contradictory. But Scripture unequivocally emphasizes the role of the *mind* in the experience of faith. The writer of Hebrews, for example, defines faith concisely as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). The Apostle Paul, in describing the lostness of his fellow Jews, clearly rejected zeal and sincerity as the definition of true faith (Rom 10:1–4). It must be based on truth.

A survey of Old and New Testament teachings on saving faith identify three components, all of which must be present at the same time, and all of which engage *the mind*:

notitia • assensus • fiducia

- **Notitia** – the *acknowledgement* of the facts of God’s word. In other words, faith cannot be present without knowledge concerning God’s revelation. At its foundation, saving faith states, “I acknowledge and understand that these are the facts about Jesus and the gospel.” Yet in itself this aspect of faith is not enough, since even demons are aware of such facts (James 2:19).
- **Assensus** – the *agreement* with the facts of God’s word. This component of faith not only acknowledges the facts presented by God’s word, but it also agrees with them as being true— *as consistent with reality*. It states, “I agree that these facts about Jesus and the gospel are real and true.” But again, this component is not enough.”
- **Fiducia** – the *appropriation* of the facts of God’s word. This is the capstone characteristic of biblical faith. It not only acknowledges facts and agrees with their truthfulness, but it embraces these facts and clings to them for their truth and beauty. It states, “I embrace these facts as directly applicable to me; they are what I need!”

Like repentance, such faith is a sovereign and gracious gift from God—not a product of human achievement (Eph 2:8–9; 2 Tim 2:24–25). Like repentance, such faith is experienced as the natural consequence of God’s monergistic work of regeneration. And like repentance, such faith is fundamentally an exercise of *the mind*.

“Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and it is conviction passing into confidence.”  
—John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 117

“Faith is a reasoning trust, a trust which recons thoughtfully and confidently upon the trustworthiness of God.”  
—John Stott, *Your Mind Matters*, 52

### For Further Study

1. Memorize 2 Corinthians 4:5–6.
2. Define *regeneration*. Support your definition with key biblical texts. Also define the *noetic effects of regeneration*. Which images are used to describe these effects?
3. Explain how the gift of repentance relates to the mind. What takes place in the mind during repentance?
4. Explain how the gift of faith relates to the mind. How is the mind involved in exercising faith?
5. At the end of the session five implications were drawn. Explain how the truth of regeneration and its effects on the mind relate to each one of these five implications: (1) You did not reason your way to Christ; (2) You do not need to think the old way anymore; (3) You do need to think the new way; (4) You must aim at the mind in your gospel witness; and (5) You must boast in what your Lord has done.
6. In light of the doctrines of the *noetic effects of sin* and the *noetic effects of regeneration*, what should be the believer’s attitude toward the opinions and solutions offered by unbelievers about transcendent issues pertaining to God, morality, the nature and purpose of life, etc.?
7. Spend a significant amount of time in prayer this week: (1) thanking God for how he has regenerated your mind and for how you now can think thoughts that are pleasing to him; and (2) petitioning that he would continue to teach you how to use your mind better for his glory.
8. The hymn “Amazing Grace” (*Hymns of Grace*, 89) reflects some of these truths regarding the effects of regeneration on the mind. Take time this week to sing through its stanzas to find references to these effects.

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** October 3, 7pm – Evening of Prayer

**Have a question?** Write to [menoftheword@gracechurch.org](mailto:menoftheword@gracechurch.org).