

## ***Regeneration and Renewal through the Holy Spirit***

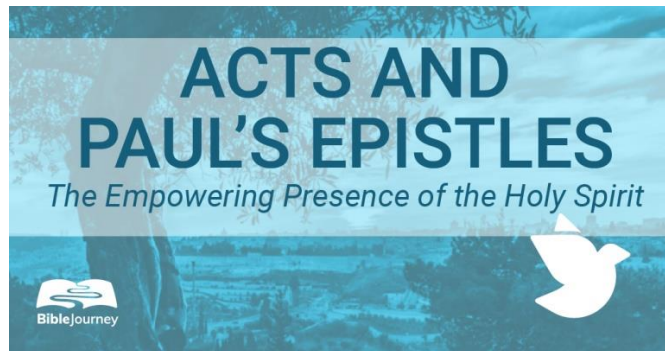
**May-June Sermon Series**

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

June 20, 2021

**TEXT: Titus 2:11-3:8**



Good morning beloved. It is good to be in God's house together this morning. We are in the midst of a series that is focused on the Holy Spirit, specifically looking at key passages in Paul's letters that deal with the power of God's Spirit in our lives and the effect of the Holy Spirit in us. We are looking at Titus, which is written near the end of Paul's life. It's a mature statement, and he looks over his shoulder to the generations coming up behind us. I remember learning from a seminary classmate who said that men become better people within 24 hours of birth of their first child. Men start to care about all kinds of things. You didn't used to care at all about playgrounds you drove by, but now that you have a child, you care about the park system. All of a sudden, you care about the schools. Also, the community matters to you, even though it never did before in the same way. My seminary friend, when his first child was born, came out of the hospital room with great joy, and he said: "My replacement is here." There's a sense in which the birth of a child gives a signal of your own mortality, but it also means that you have to invest in who is coming up next. That is really critical. The children's ministry of our church is vital. Student ministry is ~~so~~ vital. Paul's life is getting close to an end. He has spent decades in Christ's service, and his last letters are written to next-generation leaders, and this letter, Titus, speaks to this next-generation leader. What does he say? Twice in today's text, we see that he calls out specifically to emphasize the most important things, and so this morning, as we look at the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes in this passage a phrase that is unique in his letters. This phrase comes to us in the midst of a breathtaking statement of the gospel, this expression of God's goodness, His kindness, His philanthropy: He appeared, and He saves us, not by our own works. Then, he gives us this phrase in Titus 3:5:

*"...by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."*

This morning, I want to look at the doctrine of regeneration. I want to look at that together and create the category, or, if you already have the category, I want you to enlarge it. We need this category. This is the life-giving category of regeneration that happens by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and then we will look at how that changes us as individuals, and how that changes us as a community, as we function in society.

**REGENERATION AND RENEWAL.** What is regeneration? Let's start with the definition. Regeneration is God's gracious act to create new spiritual life in believers by the Holy Spirit, producing a desire for Christ-likeness in self and a zeal for good in society. Regeneration is God's gracious act. He doesn't have to do it. He's free to do it, but He acts. You cannot produce regeneration in yourself on your own. You cannot effect renewal on your own, but regeneration is God's gracious act—the grace that appears in the gospel. God acts and creates new life, new spiritual life in you and me, and He does this by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit's power. What happens with this new spiritual life? New spiritual life will create in you a desire that you did not have before. It's a desire to be like Jesus Christ. It's a desire that wells up within us, not only to know Christ, but to be like Christ, to live and think and be generous like Christ, to lay your life down for others like Christ, and this is produced by the Holy Spirit. No preacher can tell you that you should desire Christ-likeness. No earthly father can tell you that you should desire Christ-likeness. But when the Holy Spirit comes and we are born again and regeneration happens in our souls, then one of the first things that happens is this desire starts to well up within us to be like Christ. That new life, new spiritual life, also grows into a zeal and earnestness for good in society, and we will see this in our text. New spiritual life isn't just about being awakened so you can respond to the gospel. It's more than that. It's being reborn in order that your desires are pointed to Jesus Christ, and then your desire flows out of that desire to do good and to reflect God's will, to manifest Christ likeness in the broader society.

The Holy Spirit is the active agent in regeneration, just as the Spirit was active in the generation of the physical universe in the opening sentence of the Bible: “The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters getting ready to bring forth life.” Paul's writing and thinking, as a devout Israelite, trained in Scripture, is saturated with Old Testament imagery. We need the Old Testament for understanding the New. One out of every ten verses in the New Testament is a quote or an allusion to the Old. If you take regeneration and you cut yourself off from the Old Testament roots of this imagery, you might float off into some New Age spirituality or some self-directed way of doing therapy on your soul. But regeneration is a re-creation; it's new life. It produces renewal, and this image is grounded in Old Testament imagery as well as the teaching of our Lord Jesus.

I want to look very briefly at three Old Testament passages, and they all come from Ezekiel. Ezekiel is the last of the great major prophets. Look at the image of regeneration and renewal. The first passage is from Ezekiel 11. It's the ending of the saddest vision in the Old Testament, Ezekiel 9,10, and 11, when the glory of God departs from the sanctuary because of the sin of our ancestors. At the end of this very sad passage, there is a note of hope. That note of hope is that God says that they will return to this place, remove all abominations and idolatry, and then in Ezekiel 11:19, the Lord says:

*“And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,”*

There is renewal. God says: “I'm to perform open heart surgery on you. I'll take out the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Stony hearts are unresponsive, heavy, unwilling to do God's will. Have you ever encountered this in a friend, in an employer, in a student or professor, in a community member, in someone who is not responding? Hard heartedness, stony hearts, are rebellious hearts. They are hearts that sink into self, and God says: “I'm going to take that heart out and put a new heart in you with a new spirit. Notice that in all of this imagery, regeneration leads to a transformed way of living. In Ezekiel 11:20, we see the new heart produces a new walk:

*“. . .that they may walk in My statutes and keep My rules and obey them. And they shall be My people, and I will be their God.”*

The second passage, from Ezekiel 36, is perhaps the most important passage for understanding Paul's missionary labors and theology. In Ezekiel 36:25, the Lord says:

*“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.”*

We need to be cleansed in order to be renewed and regenerated. Then, again, in this renewal we see the imagery in Ezekiel 36:26-27:

*“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.”*

Notice what the Holy Spirit does. It is so exciting! We wonder how we can be different. Can we be renewed, refreshed? The Holy Spirit in you, all of a sudden, is the active power that creates new spiritual life, and then, where does that new spiritual life go? It starts to move forward in a way that obeys God. I want that. I want that for myself; I want that for you.

My best friend, Lance, shared Christ with me in high school. The gospel seed was planted in my life. I was renewed and reborn. I was regenerated, and then the Spirit of God in me started

creating new desires for Christ and new patterns of living, and that has never ceased. I praise God for that. I love when you can just go without being limited by your own fear or your own will. Lance gave me a very powerful illustration of this. He loves to mountain bike, and I noticed that he would mountain bike through very dangerous areas at high speeds. He would mountain bike in Costa Rica and other places with mountains on either side and where people were facing serious risk of injury. One time I asked him: "How do you do that?" He said: "I look straight where I should go, where it's safe, and then I just ride as fast as I can." I remember thinking: "That's not really that helpful to me!" But, we talked about it, and we discovered in that picture an image of what it's like to live by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit marks out the way that you should go, the non-death path, and then you ride as fast as you can, and your life starts to conform to Christ. You start caring about doing good in the world around you. That's the power of the Holy Spirit.

The third passage is from Ezekiel 47. The ending of Ezekiel is a huge vision. It's the longest vision in the Old Testament: Ezekiel 40-48. It's a vision of God's return and the restoration of the sanctuary. Ezekiel saw God's presence leave the sanctuary. He lived through the time when the sanctuary was destroyed by the Babylonians. He lived and prophesied in exile, and then God gave him a gracious picture of the restoration at the end, this vision of God's sanctuary and a renewal of the whole earth. Ezekiel 47 is near the end of this vision, and in Ezekiel 47 the sanctuary is restored in the vision, and then Ezekiel is standing in the courts. As he looks at the sanctuary, all of a sudden—and I am going to paraphrase—he is looking and he sees water coming out. Water is trickling out from inside the sanctuary, and an angel, who is guiding him in this vision, brings Ezekiel to the north gate. He leads him around to the east, and then he sees the water flowing that started in the sanctuary and is flowing out of the city. The angel leads him a thousand cubits. A cubit is the distance from the tip of your finger to your elbow, a foot and a half, so 1500 feet. The angel leads him farther, and all a sudden, the water is ankle-deep. He takes him another thousand cubits and looks, and the water is knee-deep. He goes another thousand, and the water is up to his waist. He goes yet another thousand, and the water coming out from the sanctuary has become a river. He sees the river and is captivated by the river in the vision, and wherever the river goes, life is renewed. As he looks at the river, all of a sudden, he sees trees springing up, bearing fruit, and their leaves bring healing to the nations. The vision that God gives Ezekiel in Ezekiel 47 is that when the Holy Spirit comes and starts from the sanctuary and floods the earth and renews it and brings healing to the nations, this imagery is interpreted in the Jewish exegetical tradition as a reference to the Holy Spirit. It is this imagery that is picked up in the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible, that the tree of life is there bearing fruit: abundance, fruitfulness, restoration, renewal, the water of God, His Holy Spirit, flowing out in people who have been regenerated and renewed. I want to be part of that. I want you to be part of that, and I want Kenwood Baptist Church to be part of that. I want to

see this new desire in you and in me for Christ-likeness and a zeal for doing good, the good of God, in our surrounding world. This imagery is not only from the prophets. It's also from our Lord's teaching in John 7:37:

*"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.'"*

Then Jesus says in John 7:38, referring to Ezekiel 47:

*"Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"*

This is regeneration. This is renewal. It is a supernatural event. It is the beginning of a growth which continues throughout our lifetime and cannot be restrained. Regeneration is not an amplification of who you are apart from Christ. That would be a nightmare! Who wants that? More of your fallen self! That's not regeneration. That's not renewal. Regeneration is new life, new desires. I'd never felt that way before. I'd never had a hunger for Jesus Christ and His Word before. New life is in us, and this river starts going through us from the sanctuary, but in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Instead of wreaking havoc in the world, we start doing good in the world. Not a good by which we would try to merit our own salvation, but a good that flows out like that water from the sanctuary. Now some of you are thinking: "I can handle it only up to my ankles." That's okay. Maybe that's all the people around you need. Maybe you live with a lot of godly people, in a godly neighborhood, in a godly community—just in ankle-deep. Others of us live in waist-deep areas. Some of us need the river. Some places in our city need the river, and it's exciting to be a part of God's renewing work in the world. It's a supernatural event.

**REGENERATION CREATES NEW LIVES.** Let's go back to Titus because we see what happens from Paul's perspective and his counsel to Titus and why he says: "I want you to talk about these things." In Titus 2:11-14, we have gospel in one great sentence. Look at this one sentence. If you understand this one sentence, then you understand the gospel, and regeneration's effect in us is to create new lives. Remember, this is all one sentence, beginning with Titus 2:11:

*"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,"*

The grace of God. Salvation is a work of God's grace, His unmerited favor. Never fall into the devil's trap of telling God that you want what you deserve. That's not what you want. That's not what I want. If we ask God for what we deserve, we deserve the judgment of hell. That's what we deserve. The gospel comes like a river of life for selfish, rebellious people like us and renews us and regenerates us and brings salvation, and this salvation is not limited to one tribe or clan. It is for all people. The grace of God has appeared, and notice, this grace is powerful. In Titus

2:12, we see the grace of God:

*“ . . . training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,”*

The Greek term for training that's used here is *paideia*—the use of Scripture to train in godliness. God's Word trains us and educates us. *Paideia* is *instruction*, and that's what's used here. He says: “The grace of God appears, and the grace of God teaches you and educates you.” It trains you. What does the grace of God train you to do? It trains you to reject and renounce ungodliness and worldly desires, or passions. That's the first move of this grace. It is powerful. It says: “I used to desire that—fame, wealth, attention of others, whatever worldly desires, and now the grace of God comes and trains you to say: “I don't need that.” Isn't that freeing? Then the grace of God trains you to live a self-controlled, upright, and godly or righteous life.

So the grace of God teaches us, educates us, disciples us. That's the word that's used here. It teaches us to live wisely, rightly, devotedly, and self-controlled. What are these things? These are classical virtues, but in Paul's thinking, these are the fruit of the Spirit. Remember Galatians chapter 5 where we started our series? You know how you think and desire without the Spirit. We desire relationships with people whom God hasn't entrusted to us, things that make us feel powerful—gossip, dissension, things that make us seem self-important. Things like this in Galatians 5, Paul says, are works of the flesh. This is what you and I desire apart from the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes in, what happens? Regeneration, new spiritual life, renewal, and, all the sudden, love. Where did that come from? Joy. Oh what a difference between joy and happiness! Happiness is so fleeting, so dependent on circumstances. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and you can have radiant joy from a prison cell. You have radiant joy in poverty. You have radiant joy in difficult circumstances. You can have radiant joy from the Holy Spirit seconds after losing your job, because that's the work of the Spirit in you: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. This is what the Holy Spirit produces in us. The gospel of grace appears: It teaches us; trains us; rejects these old desires and empowers us to live with the fruit of the Spirit, as we read in Titus 2:13:

*“ . . . waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,”*

The grace of God signals that future hope. Jesus is the One, we read in Titus 2:14:

*“ . . . who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works.”*

That little phrase, “a people for his own possession,” is the same phrase used in Exodus 19 to describe the redeemed multitude at the base of Mount Sinai. In Christ, we are part of that special people whom God has rescued. Notice the final trajectory of the grace of the gospel is

that we become zealous for good works. Good works, and I cannot stress this enough, are not checkboxes. Good works are not things that you think: "I should do this so God will be pleased with me." Good works are the result of people who been cleansed from idolatry, justified by faith in Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, and then the Holy Spirit starts to move in you, and move in me, and we seek the good that is God's will in our family, in our community, and in our world. That's where the exciting life is to be found: a people zealous for good. That's the gospel in one sentence for Paul, and he tells Titus in Titus 2:15:

*"Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you."*

He tells him to make sure to focus on these things and not get distracted.

**REGENERATION CREATES NEW SOCIETIES.** When we turn to Titus 3, we see that regeneration not only makes us new, but it also makes our society new and renews the world around us. The Christian life is not just a way by which you and I go to heaven when we die. That's a critical element of the gospel. We look for that, seeing Christ face-to-face, but if God just wanted us to be in heaven, the minute we trust Christ, we would depart. But that's not His vision. The original calling of humanity is to fill the earth with the knowledge and the goodness of God, and so look at Titus 3 with me and see how regeneration, new spiritual life, changes how we function in society. Paul tells Titus to remind the believers in Christ:

*"Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."*

There it is again. We are agents of God's good will in the world, and we are the people who are more for the world than the world is. We have salt and light function, and we have to be careful because we can fall into the trap of being "critiquers" of the world. Have you done that? Did you do that last year? Did you find anything that happened in our broader society that caused you to speak publicly or privately, in mild or strong critique, of someone in rule, power, authority, or influence? I think most of us did. This would be a good time to pause for a moment of repentance because we do this, and when we do that, we step out of the role that God has assigned to us to be agents of transformation and good where the river of life and renewal flows through us. I want to challenge you with what you're reading, watching, or listening to, or sharing, because there is a lot of content around us that will lead us into a position of a mild, low-burning anger and frustration and apathy. There is no river of life flowing through that. Certain types of media consumption are designed to hold your attention and make you angry at the wrong things. We are to be the river of life people as we relate to the world. We pray for those in authority. Sometimes people say that's only for good government. Paul said this to pray for Nero. If Paul says to listen to Nero, the worst of Rome's rulers, then there's room for all of us to be agents of good, to be gentle and show humility, because the

body of Christ is this leavening agent, this river of life agent in the world. We used to act differently. Paul paints a very vivid picture of what a non-Christian looks like in society in Titus 3:3:

*“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.”*

We were an angry lot, ticked off with everyone and bound by our own desires. That’s what we were like. We were irritating people, and this all changed. In Titus 3:4, we read:

*“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared. . .”*

The ESV uses the word “loving kindness,” but the word that's used here is “philanthropy.” Paul says that God showed philanthropy, a love for humanity. God showed love for humanity, and His kindness appeared, and we see in Titus 3:5-6:

*“. . .He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,”*

God does not give you the Holy Spirit as just a trickle, and God does not give you the Holy Spirit as a power washing.

I remember in high school being asked to paint a neighbor's house. My best friend and I were working to paint this house, getting materials together, and when we came to the jobsite we said: “Sure, we can paint the house for you.” Then, the night before we were to begin, the owner of the house said: “You know, there might need to be a little bit of scraping and preparation first.” We got to the house, and there was dried, flaking paint all over the house. When I saw it, I thought: “This just at least doubled the job. We have to scrape all that off!” Then we had a great idea: we’ll power wash this wood-sided house and blow that loose paint right off. We fired it up, aimed it at the house, and the paint came off— but so did the gutters, so did some wood chunks, and we had to shut it down. The Holy Spirit will not come like a trickle, a parsimonious portion. The Holy Spirit will not come as a power washer and just obliterate you, but the Holy Spirit will come flowing out from the sanctuary, ankle-deep, waist deep, becoming a river renewing lives around you. He poured out the Spirit richly upon us, and in Titus 3:7, we read:

*“. . .so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”*

And in Titus 3:8, he goes on to say:

*“The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who*

*have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people."*

Beloved, this morning I want you to want you to have the category of regeneration. I want you to pray for regeneration and renewal and invite the Holy Spirit into your life and ask Him to take out the stony heart, put in the fleshy, beating heart, and ask for this regeneration and renewal that will launch a desire for Christ-likeness in you. Those are desires with no regrets. Let the desire for Christ-likeness go all the way, because Christ-likeness goes all the way from character to action. The ultimate expression of Christ-likeness is Christ's willingness to come to this earth and save you and me, and it flows out in mission. Christ's big saving mission for the world is manifested in the individual and family and church expression of Christ-likeness lived out. This is the zeal for good. In Matthew 5, Jesus says that people will see your good works and they'll glorify your Father in heaven. So, let the Holy Spirit create in you a desire for Christ-likeness and His zeal for good. Walk into a situation and start asking yourself: "How can the river of life flow through me in this situation? What's the good that I can do here, right now?"

I want to close this morning with two very short illustrations, one success and one failure from my life this week. I'll start with the failure. We had a contractor who came to our neighbor's house. The neighbor had some landscaping beds that were getting out of control, and the person who cuts their yard was contracted to come in and do a landscape cleanup, take out the weeds, refresh mulch. The dividing lines in our backyard in our neighbor's backyard are three stately evergreen trees. They are beautiful trees, twenty-two or twenty-three-year-old trees. They are majestic, and they give this beautiful screen of privacy between our backyard and our neighbor's deck. The contractor came, power tools in hand, and in two minutes he buzzed through all the low branches on those evergreen trees. I was stunned, and I stepped out of the river of life. The contractor was then working across the street on another house, and I bee-lined over there, and I wasn't bringing the water from the river of life. I was bringing fits of rage, division, enmity, and hostility. I walked over there and I said: "What were you thinking? You just wiped out my beautiful, green, privacy fence!" I came on with so much force that his only option was to escalate. He escalated, and he said, "All those branches were dead." So I escalated. I said, "Go over there right now and look at those branches that you cut off with all the needles on them!" It was bad. I felt bad afterward though. I've met this person before. I know him, and I know he's not someone walking with Christ, and I felt terrible with how I'd handled that. I stepped away from self, back into the river of life, and I thought: "What do I do now?" The goodness and kindness of our God and Savior. So I reached out to him, and I gave a sincere apology for how I'd acted, and I have a gift certificate ready for him next time I see him. I also planted some big hydrangeas!

Let me tell you a positive story. When we were selling our previous home and getting ready to

move into our new home, we needed a few projects done. We had a man come to help us with a number of things, and the night before he came, his son was killed on I-71 in a head-on collision. A drunk driver turned the wrong direction and came onto I-71 into opposing traffic, and here he was at my house the next day. What you say? There had already been zeal for good because Christian love had been extended to this family before he got to our house. When we saw him, we just cried. We had never met this man, but we just cried and prayed for him and with him. An hour after my evergreen tree meltdown, I found myself at a wedding. I came into the wedding, and there was this man and his wife. I hardly recognized him in a shirt and tie, and there was his wife, whom we had never met. My wife was in the river, and she just moved graciously and sweetly right toward her and said: "We've been praying for you." In the midst of this wedding reception, a wonderful, joyous wedding, we had this God moment where the Holy Spirit was working all that together and creating a zeal to do good. That's what we are supposed to be. Let's ask for the Holy Spirit to come and regenerate us and renew us and create in us a desire for Christ-likeness and a zeal for doing good.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.