

Regeneration Ezekiel 11:19-20

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 374-378, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

Ezekiel 11:19-20

“And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes, and keep My ordinances, and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.”

The prophet Ezekiel adds, *that they may walk in My statutes, and keep My judgments, and do them, and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.* Now the Prophet more clearly expresses **how God would give His elect hearts of flesh instead of those of stone, when he regenerates them by His Spirit**, and when He forms them to obey His law, so that they may willingly observe His commands, and efficiently accomplish what He causes them to will.

Now let us consider more attentively the whole matter of which the Prophet treats. When God speaks of a stony heart, He doubtless condemns all mortals of obstinacy. For the Prophet is not here treating of a few whose nature differs from others, but as in a glass He puts the Israelites before us, that we know what our condition is, when being deserted by God we follow our natural inclinations.

We collect, therefore, from this place, that **all have a heart of stone**, that is, that all are so corrupt that they cannot bear to obey God, since they are entirely carried away to obstinacy. Meanwhile it is certain that this fault is adventitious [i.e., not inherent in man from Creation, but rather extrinsically received through Adam's first sin¹], for when God created man He did not bestow upon him a heart of stone, and as long as Adam stood sinless, doubtless His will was upright and well disposed, and it was also inclined to obedience to God.

The effects of the Fall—In Adam's sin, we sinned all. (The doctrine of original sin)

When therefore we say that our heart is of stone, this takes its origin from the fall of Adam, and from the corruption of our nature; for if Adam had been created with a hard and obstinate heart, that would have been a reproach to God. But as we have said, the will of Adam was upright from the beginning, and flexible to follow the righteousness of God; but **when Adam corrupted himself, we perished with him**. Hence, therefore, the stony heart, because we have put off that integrity of nature which God had conferred on us at the beginning. For whatever Adam lost we also lost by the fall, because he was not created for his own self alone, but in his person God showed what would be the condition of the human race. [In other words, Adam served as our federal head; the whole human race fell through Adam's first sin.]

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 16: “Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression?” Answer: The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity [descendants]; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression. (Genesis 2:16, 17; Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:21, 22)

Hence after he had been spoiled of the excellent gifts by which he was adorned, all his posterity were reduced to the same want and misery. **Hence our heart is stony—but through original depravity**, because we ought to attribute this to our father Adam, and not to throw the fault of our sin and corruption on God.

Finally, we see what the beginning of regeneration is, namely, when God takes away that depravity by which we are bound down. But two parts of regeneration must be marked, of which also the Prophet treats.

Total depravity explained—The Fall has corrupted man’s entire soul—His mind, affections, emotions, and spirit—and even his physical body.

God pronounces *that He gives to His elect one heart and new spirit*. It follows, therefore, that the whole soul is vitiated [corrupted], from reason even to the affections.

Semi-Pelagianism (which includes Roman Catholicism and other groups) teaches that man’s soul is sick but not dead in trespasses and sins.

The sophists in the Papacy [i.e., those skilled in elaborate and devious argumentation, such as the professors of the Sorbonne (university) in Paris] confess that man’s soul is vitiated [corrupted], but only in part. They are also compelled to subscribe to the ancients, that Adam lost supernatural gifts, and that natural ones were corrupted, but afterwards they involve the light in darkness, and feign that some part of the reason remains sound and entire, then that the will is vitiated only in part. Hence it is a common saying of theirs, that man’s free will was wounded and injured, but that it did not perish.

Now they define free will as the free faculty of choice, which is joined with reason and also depends upon it. For the will by itself, without the judgment, does not contain full and solid liberty, but when reason governs and holds the chief power in the soul of man, then the will obeys and forms itself after the *prescribed* rule: that is free will. The Papists do not deny that free will is injured and wounded, but as I have already said, they hold back something, as if men were partly right by their own proper motion, and some inclination or flexible motion of the will remained as well towards good as evil. Thus indeed they prate in the schools: but we see what the Holy Spirit pronounces.

The true, Biblical doctrine of regeneration explained

For if there is need of a new spirit and a new heart, it follows that the soul of man is not only injured in each part, but so corrupt that its depravity may be called death and destruction, as far as rectitude is concerned.

The apostle Paul taught in Ephesians 2:1-7: “And you *He made alive*, who were **dead** in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were **by nature** [i.e., in our natural condition, from birth, as children of Adam] children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, **even when we were dead** in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (emphasis added)

Despite his spiritual deadness and darkness, man is still more advanced than animals, as “some sparks of intelligence remain.”

But here a question is objected, whether men differ at all from brute beasts? But experience proves that men are endued with some reason. I answer, as it is said in the first chapter of John (John 1:5), that light shines in darkness; that is, that **some sparks of intelligence remain**, but so far from leading any man into the way [of salvation], they do not enable him to see it. Hence whatever reason and intelligence there is in us, it does not bring us into the path of obedience to God, and much less leads by continual perseverance to the goal. [Thus, man, being dead in trespasses and sins, it is impossible for him to save himself.]

What then? **These very sparks shine in the darkness to render men without excuse.** Behold, therefore, how far man’s reason prevails, that he may feel self-convinced that no pretext for ignorance or error remains to him. **Therefore man’s intelligence is altogether useless towards guiding his life aright.** Perverseness more clearly appears in his heart. For man’s will boils over to obstinacy, and when anything right and what God approves is put before us, our affections immediately become restive and ferocious; like a refractory horse when he feels the spur leaps up and strikes his rider, so our will betrays its obstinacy when it admits nothing but what reason and a sound intelligence dictates.

I have already taught that man’s reason is blind, but that blindness is not so perspicuous in us, because, as I have said, God has left in us some light, that no excuse for error should remain. It is not surprising, then, if God here promises *that He would give a new heart*, because **if we examine all the affections of men, we shall find them hostile to God.** For that passage of St. Paul (Romans 8:9) is true, that all the thoughts of the flesh are hostile to God. Doubtless he here takes *the flesh* after his own manner, namely, as signifying the whole man as he is by nature and is born into the world. Since, therefore, all our affections are hostile and repugnant to God, we see how foolishly the schoolmen [i.e., the professors of religion in the universities and seminaries, such as of the Sorbonne in Paris] trifle, who feign that the will is injured [but not dead], and so this weakness is to them in the place of death.

Paul says that he was sold under sin, that is, as far as he was one of the sons of Adam: “The law,” he says, “works in us sin” (Romans 7:14); “I am sold and enslaved to sin.” But what do they [the schoolmen] say? That sin indeed reigns in us, but only in part, for there is some integrity which resists it. Thus we see how far they differ from St. Paul!

[Only a Savior can bring the dead to life. Salvation is all of God. To be regenerated or born again, the Holy Spirit must act first. Only then can man be awoken from his dark and dead state in order to repent and believe.]

But this passage also with sufficient clearness refutes comments of this kind, where God pronounces *that newness of heart and spirit is His own free gift.*

Ephesians 2:8-10 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; **it is the gift of God**, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (emphasis added)

Therefore Scripture uses the name of creation elsewhere, which is worthy of notice. “Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is a new creation*; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15, emphasis added).

As often as the Papists boast that they have even the least particle of rectitude, they reckon themselves to be creators, since when Paul says that we are born again by God’s Spirit, he calls us ἀὐτοῦ ποίημα, His fashioning or workmanship, and explains that we are created unto good works (Ephesians 2:10). To the same purpose is the language of the Psalm (Psalm 100:3), “He made us, not we ourselves”. For he is not treating here of that first creation by which we became men, but of that special grace by which we are born again [regenerated] by the Spirit of God.

Semi-Pelagians deny to God His rightful role in saving man and making him a new creation in Christ.

If therefore regeneration is a creation of man, whoever arrogates to himself even the least share in the matter, seizes so much from God, as if he were his own creator, which is detestable to be heard of. And yet this is easily elicited from the common teaching of Scripture.

Now it follows, *that they shall walk in My statutes, and keep My precepts and do them*. Here the Prophet removes other doubts, by which Satan has endeavored to obscure the grace of God, because he could not entirely destroy it. We have already seen that the Papists do not entirely take away the grace of God; for they are compelled to confess that man can do nothing except he is assisted by God’s grace, and that free will lies without vigor and efficacy until it revives by the assistance of grace. Hence they have that in common with us, that man, as he is corrupt, cannot even move a finger so as to discharge any duty towards God.

The Semi-Pelagian (and Roman Catholic) teachings further explained

But here **they err in two ways**, because, as I have already said, **they feign that some right motion remains in man’s will, besides that there is sound reason in the mind; and they afterwards add that the grace of the Holy Spirit is not efficacious without the concurrence or co-operation of our free will**. And here their gross impiety is detected. Hence they confess that we are regenerated by the Spirit of God, because we should otherwise be useless to think anything aright, namely, because weakness hinders us from willing efficaciously. But, on the contrary, they imagine God’s grace to be mutilated, but how? because God’s grace stirs us up towards ourselves, so that we become able to wish well, and also to follow out and perfect what we have willed. [The thinking goes like this: we have made our decision to follow Christ, and now grace will help us achieve what we have willed to do; we have exercised our faith, so now God will regenerate us. Our salvation is thus a cooperative effort between us and God.]

We see, therefore, that when they treat of the grace of the Holy Spirit, they leave man suspended in the midst. How far then does the Spirit of God work within us? They say, that we may be able to will rightly and to act rightly. Hence nothing else is given us by the Holy Spirit but the ability: but it is ours to co-operate, and to strengthen and to establish what otherwise would be of no avail. For what advantage is there in the ability

without the addition of the upright will? Our condemnation would only be increased. But here is their ridiculous ignorance, for how could any one stand even for a single moment, if God conferred on us only the ability. Adam had that ability in his first creation, and then he was as yet perfect, but we are depraved; so that as far as the remains of the flesh abide in us which we carry about in this life, we must strive with great difficulties.

If therefore Adam by and bye fell, although endued with rectitude of nature and with the faculty of willing and of acting uprightly, what will become of us? For we have need not only of Adam's uprightness, and of his faculty of both willing and acting uprightly, but we have need of unconquered fortitude, that we may not yield to temptations, but be superior to the devil, and subdue all depraved and vicious affections of the flesh, and persevere unto the end in this wrestling or warfare. We see, therefore, how childishly they trifle who ascribe nothing else to the grace of the Holy Spirit unless the gift of ability.

The Biblical doctrine of predestination and the perseverance of the saints, as expounded by Augustine

And **Augustine** expounds this wisely, and treats it at sufficient length in his book "Concerning the gift of perseverance, and the predestination of the saints;" for he compares us with the first Adam, and shows that God's grace would not be efficacious, except in the case of a single individual, unless he granted us more than the ability.

The Biblical teaching

But what need have we of human testimonies, when the Holy Spirit clearly pronounces by the mouth of His Prophet what we here read? Ezekiel does not say: "I will give them a new spirit or a new heart, that they may walk and be endued with that moderate faculty" What then? He says, *that they may walk in My precepts, that they may keep My statutes, and perform My commands.* We see therefore that regeneration extends so far that the effect follows, as also Paul teaches: "Complete," says he, "your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12); here he exhorts the faithful to the attempt.

And truly God does not wish us to be like stones. Let us strive therefore and stretch all our nerves, and do our utmost towards acting uprightly. But Paul advises that to be done with fear and trembling; that is, by casting away all confidence in one's own strength, because if we are intoxicated with that diabolical pretense that we are fellow-workers with God, and that His grace is assisted by the motion of our free will, we shall break down, and at length God will show how great our blindness was.

Paul gives the reason, because, says he, it is God who works both to will and to accomplish (Philippians 2:13). He does not say there that it is God who works the ability, and who excites in us the power of willing, but he says that **God is the author of that upright will**, and then he adds also the effect; because it is not sufficient to will unless we are able to execute.

Man has a will, but not a free will.

As to the word "power," Paul does not use it, for it would occasion dispute, but he says that God works in all of us to accomplish. If any one object, that men naturally will and act naturally by their own proper judgment and motion, I answer, that the will is naturally implanted in man, from which this faculty belongs equally to the elect and the reprobate.

All therefore will, but through Adam's fall it happens that our will is depraved and rebellious against God: will, I say, remains in us, but it is enslaved and bound by sin. From where then comes an upright will? Even from regeneration by the Spirit. Hence the Spirit does not confer on us the faculty of willing, for it is inherent to us from our birth, that is, it is hereditary, and a part of the creation which could not be blotted out by Adam's fall; **but when the will is in us, God gives us to will rightly, and this is His work.** Besides, when it is said that He gives us the power of willing, this is not understood generally, because it ought not to be extended to the bad as well as to the good; but when Paul is treating of the salvation of men, he deservedly assigns to God our willing uprightly.

Perseverance in holiness is also a special work of God.

We now understand what the Prophet's words signify, and it seems that he denotes **perseverance** when he says, *that they may walk in My precepts, and keep My judgments and do them.* The whole matter had been explained in one word, *that they may walk in My statutes:* but because men always sinfully consider how they may lessen the grace of God, and by sacrilegious boldness endeavor to draw to themselves what belongs to Him; therefore that the Prophet may better exclude all pride, he says that **we must attribute to God the walking in His precepts, preserving His statutes, and obeying His whole law. Hence let us leave entirely His own praise to God, and thus acknowledge that in our good works nothing is our own; and especially in perseverance, let us reckon it God's singular gift.**

Man's works are never good, except by God's grace and by virtue of His working in us. (Thus, man can never earn salvation by his own works or merits!)

And this is surely necessary, if we consider how very weak we are, and with how many and what violent attacks Satan continually urges us. First of all, we may easily fall every moment, unless God sustain us. And then the thrusts of Satan by far exceed our strength. **If therefore we consider our condition without the grace of God, we shall confess that in our good works the only part which is ours is the fault, as also Augustine wisely makes this exception: for it is sufficiently known that no work is so praiseworthy as not to be sprinkled with some fault.** Neither do the duties which we discharge proceed from a perfect love of God, but we have always to wrestle that we may obey Him. We seem then to contaminate our deeds by this defect. **There is then in our good works that very thing which vitiates [corrupts] them, so that they are deservedly rejected before God.** But when we treat of uprightness and praise, we must learn to leave to God what is His own, lest we wish to be partakers in sacrilege.

The forgiveness of God

Now it follows, *and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.* Under these words the Prophet doubtless includes that gratuitous pardon by which God reconciles sinners to Himself. And truly, it would not be sufficient for us to be renewed in obedience to God's righteousness unless His paternal indulgence, by which He pardons our infirmities, is added.

This is expressed more clearly by Jeremiah: "But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33), and by our Prophet, "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you

shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*" (Ezekiel 36:25-27), but it is the mark of a Scripture phrase. For as often as God promises the sons of Abraham that they should be His people, that promise has no other foundation than in His gratuitous covenant which contains the forgiveness of sins.

Hence it is as if the Prophet had added, that God would expiate [take away, remove] all the faults of His people. For our safety is contained in these two members, that God follows us with His paternal favor, while He bears with us, and does not call us up for judgment, but buries our sins, as is said in Psalm 32:1, 2, "Blessed is the man to whom God does not impute his iniquities." It follows, on the other side, that all are wretched and accursed to whom He does impute them.

We ought continually to repent of our sins and seek God's continuing forgiveness.

If any one object, that we have no need of pardon when we do not sin, the answer is easy, that the **faithful are never so regenerated as to fulfill the law of God**. They aspire to keep His commands, and that too with a serious and sincere affection; but because some defects always remain, therefore they are guilty, and their guilt cannot be blotted out otherwise than by expiation when God pardons them. But we know that there were under the law rites prescribed for expiating their sins: this was the meaning of sprinkling by water and the pouring out of blood; but we know that these ceremonies were of no value in themselves, except as far as they directed the people's faith to Christ.

Hence, whenever our salvation is treated of, let these two things be remembered: that we cannot be reckoned God's sons unless He freely expiate our sins, and thus reconcile Himself to us: and then not unless He also rule us by His Spirit. Now we must hold, that what God has joined man ought not to separate. Those, therefore, who through relying on the indulgence of God permit themselves to give way to sin, rend His covenant and impiously sever it. Why so? because God has joined these two things together, that is, that He will be propitious [benevolent; kind] to His sons, and will also renew their hearts. Hence those who lay hold of only one member of the sentence, namely, the pardon, because God bears with them, and omit the other, are as false and sacrilegious as if they abolished half of God's covenant.

Therefore we must hold what I have said, namely, that under these words **reconciliation** is pointed out, by which it happens that God does not impute their sins to His own. Lastly, let us remark that the whole perfection of our salvation has been placed in this, if God reckons us among His people. As it is said in Psalm 33:12, "Happy is the people to whom the LORD is their God." There solid happiness is described, namely, when God deems any people worthy of this honor of belonging peculiarly to Himself. Only let Him be propitious to us, and then we shall not be anxious, because our salvation is secure. It follows —

God's warning to the unregenerate

EZEKIEL 11:21

“But *as for those* whose hearts walk after the heart [desire] for their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their deeds on their own heads,” says the Lord God.”

The phrase which the Prophet uses is indeed harsh: he says, *their heart goes after heart*, so that some interpret this of imitation: namely, since God promises that He will be an avenger if any of the people conduct themselves after bad examples and unite in alliance with the wicked, just as if they glued together their hearts and affections, but that is harsh. The repetition is therefore superfluous, and the Prophet means nothing else than that God will be avenged if the Israelites follow their own heart [desire], so as to walk in their own foulness and abominations. First of all we must understand the reason why the Prophet uses this sentiment. God had liberally poured out the treasures of His mercy, but since, hypocrites have always been mixed with the good, at the same time that they confidently boast themselves members of the Church, and use the name of God with great audacity; so that the Prophet uses this threat that they may not think all the promises which we hear of to belong to themselves promiscuously. For there were always many reprobate among the elect people, because not all who sprang from father Abraham were true Israelites (Romans 9:6, 7). Since therefore it was so, the Prophet properly shows here that what he had previously promised was peculiar to God's elect, and to the true and lawful members of the Church, but not to the spurious, nor to the degenerate, nor to those who are unregenerated by the true and incorruptible seed. This is the Prophet's intention.

But lest there might seem to be too much rigor when God, as it were, armed comes down into the midst to destroy all who do not repent, the Prophet here declares their crime—namely, because *their heart walks after their heart* [desire], that is, your heart draws itself, and so the word heart is twice repeated. It is indeed a superfluous repetition but emphatic, when he says, that the heart of those who so pertinaciously adhere to their own superstitions is then impelled by its own self to new motions, so that by its continual tenor it goes always towards superstitions. Hence I will be an avenger, says God.

Hence as often as God proposes to us testimonies of His favor, let each descend into himself and examine all his affections. But when any one lays hold of his own vices let him not please himself in them, but rather groan over them, and strive to renounce his own affections that he may follow God: neither let him harden himself in obstinacy, so that his heart may not proceed and rush continually towards evil, as is here said.

PRAYER.

Grant, Almighty God, since we have utterly perished in our father Adam, and there remains in us no single part which is not corrupt, while we carry material for wrath, and cursing, and death, as well in the soul as in the body, that being regenerated by the Spirit, we may more and more withdraw ourselves from our own will and our own spirit, and so submit ourselves to You, that Your Spirit may truly reign within us. And afterwards, grant that we may not be ungrateful, but considering how inestimable is this benefit, may we dedicate our whole life and apply ourselves to glorify Your name, in Jesus Christ our Lord. — Amen.