

Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

Does Faith Cause Regeneration?

JOHN PIPER, DTHEOL

Audio Transcript:¹ Good Monday morning out there to everyone listening. Thanks for listening to the podcast. We start the week with a question from an anonymous listener, who writes in to ask this: “Hello, Pastor John, and thank you for APJ! My question is this: Can you tell me if Paul says in [Colossians 2:12](#) that faith causes regeneration? Or is it the other way around? Does regeneration cause faith? I can’t make sense of this text, but it seems to answer this question. I’d love your help. Thank you!”



Well, [Colossians 2:12](#) is a very precious verse for me personally, not because it describes how I was raised from spiritual death to life in Christ, but because it became a crucial text for me at a moment in my life, in Germany, fifty years ago this year. In a time of controversy over baptism, this verse, [Colossians 2:12](#), shed light for me on the question. Would I be a Baptist and continue to believe that only believers should be baptized, or would I shift and embrace infant baptism?

[Colossians 2:11–12](#) says,

In [Christ] you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith [underline that phrase] in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

So, baptism represents death with Christ in burial and new life in Christ through resurrection as we come up out of the water. Verse 12 says this resurrection with Christ in baptism happens “through faith.” That little phrase, “through faith,” is one of the decisive reasons why I remained a Baptist — though I was the only Baptist in the class among Lutherans in Germany — and why I do not think the New Testament teaches the baptism of infants who do not yet exercise faith.

¹ To hear this Podcast: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-faith-cause-regeneration>.

Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

WHAT COMES FIRST?

But the person asking this question is wondering whether [Colossians 2:12](#) teaches that this faith causes regeneration — that is, causes the new birth. The answer to that is no, it doesn't teach that, and it doesn't teach the opposite — namely, that the new birth causes faith.

That question is simply not addressed in this verse — not as far as I can see, anyway. You have “been buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.” It's not addressed. It's like saying, “I was buried after a cave-in in the mine, and I got out through a tunnel.” But that statement “through a tunnel” doesn't tell you who built the tunnel. Did I dig it, or did someone dig it for me? None of that is addressed in this verse.

But I assume the person asking this question wants to know more than just “Nope, the verse doesn't have anything to do with that. See you later.” That's probably not why this person wrote to us. They're interested, I assume, in the doctrine — that is, the teaching, the reality, not just the verse. Namely, does faith bring about regeneration, or does regeneration by the Holy Spirit bring about faith?

BORN AGAIN TO BELIEF

Now, here's my answer: I don't think there is a single verse, a single passage, in the Bible that teaches that faith causes or brings about regeneration, or the new birth. But I think there are many texts that teach that the new birth precedes and brings about faith — in other words, texts that teach the new birth, or regeneration, is the gracious, free, sovereign work of God prior to our new life in Christ, which creates that life and brings about faith.

“The new birth, or regeneration, is the gracious, free, sovereign work of God.”

So let me give some passages that teach this and then say why I think it's so important. [First John 5:1](#) says, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” Not “everyone who believes *will be born* of God,” but “everyone who is now believing *has already been born* of God.” It's the new birth by God that brings about the believing.

Or [John 1:12](#) says, “To all who did receive [Christ], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God.” Then he explains what he just said, how that believing came about, in the next verse, verse 13: “. . . who were born, not of blood nor of

Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” In other words, the new birth, which he wants to underline several ways, did not come about from the powers of the flesh, nor from human willing. It came about from God. We didn’t will ourselves alive. God, not man, brings about the new birth, which provides the spiritual life that believes.

Or [Acts 13:48](#), when the Gentiles heard Paul’s gospel, “they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.” It says, “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed,” not the other way around — not “as many as believed were then appointed to eternal life.” But as many as God had already appointed for eternal life, those are the ones who believed, because God grants his elect the gift of faith.

Or [Ephesians 2:8–9](#) says, “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

If we had time, we could look at [Philippians 1:29](#). I’m going to list these so that people can just stop the recording right here and look them all up, because I said there were many:

- [Philippians 1:29](#)
- [2 Corinthians 4:4–6](#)
- [John 3:7–8](#)
- [John 6:44, 65](#)
- [2 Timothy 2:25](#)
- [1 Corinthians 1:23–24](#)

WHY THE ORDER MATTERS

But I think I will let folks do their own work on that — track those down, decide if they agree — and close by giving some reasons, maybe three, why this is so important. Because some people might say, “Good grief. What difference does it make — believe and have life, either way, first or second?” Well, here’s why it matters.

1. Realistic About Sin

First, it makes us realistic and so reminded about the power of sin, if we believe that we must be raised from the dead before we can believe. If we think that we can provide the decisive power in the moment of our conversion — to pass out of spiritual death that cannot please God, into spiritual life that sees and treasures Christ in faith — we simply

Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

do not yet have a right view of the power and depth and horror of our own sinful depravity.

*“Left to ourselves, apart from sovereign grace,
we will be dead and blind forever.”*

Paul says in [Romans 8:7–8](#), “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” In other words, the fallen condition of every human is the frightening, desperate moral inability to change his own nature. Left to ourselves, apart from sovereign grace decisively changing us so that we treasure the glory of Christ, we will be dead and blind forever.

We do no one any service by treating the condition of the fallen human heart in a way that’s not true by implying people can create their own faith when they are dead in their trespasses and sins.

2. Alive to Grace

Here’s the second reason this really matters. Unless we realize that God takes the initiative and provides the decisive power for us to wake from the dead and see Christ as true and glorious, we will never sing amazing grace with the kind of understanding and affection that we ought to. We’ll never know the greatness and the sweetness of the grace of God unless we know that new birth was his totally sovereign, undeserved gift when we were dead. We just won’t know what it means to be saved.

3. Hopeful in Prayer and Witness

Here’s the third and the last one I’ll mention. Really, it’s two, but I’m combining them into one. If you know that the new birth is the sovereign work of God, a gift of grace, you will have both hope in your praying and hope in your personal witnessing (so prayer and evangelism).

You will have hope to pray as you ought and witness to lost people as you ought. You will realize that you cannot cause anyone to believe who is dead in their trespasses and sins and who’s blind to the glory of Christ. But if you believe that God has ordained prayer and witnessing as the means of his own sovereign act in raising people from the dead, then you will be able to pray and to share the gospel with hope and with earnestness.

Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

So no, [Colossians 2:12](#) does not teach this, nor does it contradict this. But many other passages of Scripture do teach the glorious truth that God is the one who regenerated dead sinners and who gave us faith.

John Piper ([@JohnPiper](#)) is founder and teacher of Desiring God and chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of [more than 50 books](#), including *Desiring God* and *The Pleasures of God*. [Read more about John](#).

© Ask Pastor John (Episode 1774). *Desiring God*, April 25, 2022. Retrieved October 19, 2026.
<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-faith-cause-regeneration>

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc.*