

What Is the Nature of Us?

Here's a quick mushroom test. [Show mushroom slide] Which of these two types of mushrooms is edible? One was known as the favorite of Roman nobility. The other was used to poison one of the Caesars. Give up? The one on the left is edible. The one on the right is deadly. Or as the dark humor of some mushroom hunters goes, "All mushrooms are edible, but some are edible only once."

The lesson is this: unless you know the true nature of a thing, you are likely to misuse it. That's not only true of mushrooms but of tools, computers, and even ourselves.

The next of our Affirmations of Faith has to do with the nature of us. It's stated this way: *REGENERATION – We believe that all people are sinners by nature and by choice and are, therefore, under condemnation. We believe that those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior are regenerated by the Holy Spirit.*

There are some very important truths openly declared in this statement and others that are implied. Let's begin with an implied truth, which is this...

I. We Were Created in Wonder.

The word *regenerate* in our affirmation is key. To regenerate something is to, "restore, make over, reconstitute... to a favorable state." (Webster) So, to regenerate a person means that they will be "restored or reconstituted morally to a favorable state." The implied truth in our statement of faith is that, at one point, humanity had a nature favorably better than the one we have today. Where do we find this truth in the Bible? First, we see it in chapters one through three of Genesis. In Gen. 1, six days of Creation are described and five times it says, "and God saw that it was good," but on the sixth day, after creating a man and a woman, it says: (Gen. 1:31)

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. ...

So, this period of time before chapter three of Genesis was a unique time on planet Earth. It was the time before sin, before death, before evil were present here. Can you imagine that? Probably not, because none of us has ever known a time when evil was NOT present.

So, what about the opposite of evil—goodness? What is goodness? The best definition of goodness is God! Over and over in the Psalms we are told that "God is good." (Ps. 25: 8, 100:5, 119:68) And in Ps. 92:15 we are told that, in fact, there is no evil whatsoever in God.

... the LORD is upright; ... there is no unrighteousness in him. (Ps. 92:15)

Which brings us to Ps. 139:14, which says that we, along with all creation, were made to know and experience goodness.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

Does your soul know that? You see, one of the first deceptions Satan tries to pull on us is to convince us that we are not capable of goodness, that there's a design flaw in us that makes it impossible for us to be anything but un-good. For example, has anyone ever done some unkind, hurtful thing to you or broken a promise to you and then said, "You know, I'm sorry if I hurt you but that's just who I am. You're just going to have to get used to it. A tiger can't change his stripes and I can't change who I am." Has anyone tried to use that excuse on you?

Now, don't get ahead of me here. There actually is something broken in us, that's what Genesis 3 explains. We'll get to that in a minute. But there's a difference between something being broken and something having a design flaw, isn't there? If a belt in my car's engine breaks and the car stops running, do I need a new car or a new belt? We were designed by God. If we are not living a godly life in obedience to the instructions in His owner's manual, it's not because of a bad design by the Creator. The psalmist has it exactly right when he says:

... I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Ps. 139:14)

We fundamentally need to affirm this. Any malfunctioning of our lives isn't a design flaw.

But this does raise a significant question. If my design is so good, then what happened? How is it possible that I'm so broken? Here's the full truth. We were created in wonder but ...

II. We Defiled Our Wonder.

If you have artistic ability and you paint a beautiful landscape, hang it on your wall and someone comes in with a knife and slices it up, that would be very wrong, wouldn't it? That would be evil. So, where does evil come from? A common question today is this, "If everything that God created is good, then where did evil come from? Why does God allow bad things like deadly viruses to exist, if He supposedly loves us so much?"

John Calvin, one of the early founders of Protestant Christianity, wrote this:

... the Lord had declared that "everything that he had made ... was exceedingly good" [Genesis 1:31]. Whence, then comes this wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? Lest we should think it comes from creation, God had put His stamp of approval on what had come forth from himself. By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord; and by his fall drew all his posterity with him into destruction. [Institutes, 3:23:8]

Rom. 5 explains what happened in Genesis 3, which is the story of the Garden of Eden:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned ... (Rom. 5:12)

Pastor John MacArthur says of this verse:

"Death, pain, disease, stress, exhaustion, calamity, and all the bad things that happen came as a result of the entrance of sin into the universe. All those evil effects of sin continue to work in the world and will be with us as long as sin is... God's role is never as [sin's] author.

... It is helpful, I think, to understand that sin is not itself a thing created. Sin is neither substance, being, spirit, nor matter... Sin is simply a lack of moral perfection in a fallen creature. Fallen creatures bear full responsibility for their sin. And all evil in the universe emanates from the sins of fallen creatures."¹

In theological terms this is called "imputational guilt." In laymen's terms this means that two things are true about sin. First, Adam's sin changed his moral DNA. He was created innocent, but his disobedience of God's command changed his nature. It broke it so that not only he but everyone born after him would have a proclivity toward sin.

If it seems unfair to you that you've inherited this 'fallen nature,' well, this verse points out, secondly, that all people have ratified their sinful nature by their own free-will choices.

... and so death spread to all men, because all sinned ... (Rom. 5:12)

So, the Bible teaches that God created morality. He decided what is right and what is wrong. But ever since the Garden of Eden, people don't just have a proclivity to sin but by our own free will, we've all chosen to sin and the consequence is that we and all creation live under a

curse, which is the consequence of sin. God told Adam and Eve that they would die if they disobeyed. But Satan said to Eve...

... “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Gen. 3:4b, 5)

Satan is so clever. He lays a perfect trap for Adam and Eve. Do you see it? Look! He lies three times. First, he says, *“You will not surely die.”* But they did die, as soon as they ate the fruit, not physically, but spiritually. Secondly, he lied when he said to them, *“when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”* But wait; they’re ALREADY like God!! They’re made in His image. Satan offers them something they already possess! And thirdly, Satan lied by saying, *“your eyes will be opened... knowing good and evil.”* But Adam and Eve were living in a world where there was NO EVIL. SO, WHY WOULD IT BE NECESSARY TO KNOW EVIL IF YOU LIVED IN A WORLD WHERE IT DIDN’T EXIST!!!!

Adam and Eve fell for the trick. They believed his lies. Satan’s only purpose in speaking with them was not to help Adam and Eve, but to gain access into this world. Believing Satan will NEVER benefit you. Adam and Eve had the full authority to throw Satan, who appeared in the form of a serpent, out of the garden. God told both of them in Gen. 1:28 that He was giving them full dominion over *“...every living thing that moves on the earth.”* They had the authority to throw the serpent out! But instead, they invited him in. And they listened. And they believed. And they died spiritually. They were alive physically and mentally but their spirits had died, just as God said they would. And each of us has faced the same serpent in our lifetime and done exactly the same thing. And by doing so, we have defiled the wonder of our creation.

So, what, if anything, can be done about this? Praise be to God, the N.T. shows us that...

III. Our Wonder Can Be Restored

What does the word “regeneration” mean again? It means, *“to restore, recover, reconstitute to a favorable state.”* Earlier, I used the example of a car with a broken part to describe what sin does to us. But that’s actually not the best illustration. Jesus didn’t use cars as illustrations. In the New Testament the classic example of what must be done to fix our “sin problem” is much more organic. The apostle Paul lines it out for us in Eph. 2. He writes:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1-3)

This is what happened to Adam and Eve when they believed the lies of Satan instead of the truths of God. They lost their fellowship with God, which meant they lost their grip on the truth! Before they ate the fruit, they didn’t need to know about evil because it didn’t exist in their world. But now, they opened the door to evil and it spread like a virus. It eventually found its way into every human heart. This is what 1 Cor. 15 is explaining...

Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam (Jesus) became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor. 15:45-49) If we are regenerated.

The apostle Paul is explaining that Adam's ability to have a relationship with God through the spirit within him was "hacked" by Satan when he tricked Adam into obeying him, rather than God. It's like being tricked on our computers. A hacker sends us a false email, (You've won a million dollars!). We believe it, click on it, and... we're no longer in control of our computer! Adam sinned, got spiritually hacked, and lost control of his life. That's what happened to us when we believed Satan's lies.

But Paul says there is a miraculous solution. It's not a self-help solution because our problem isn't that we haven't tried hard enough. Our problem is that we're spiritually dead! And we can't regenerate our own spirit! This is what Paul means when he says in 1 Cor. 15:50

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

We have to be spiritually brought back to life to enter heaven. And how does that happen?

Paul wrote a letter to his disciple, Titus, whom he had appointed to pastor churches on the island of Crete. Listen to this description of Cretan society by a Greek historian:

"Money is so highly valued among them, that its possession is not only thought to be necessary but in the highest degree creditable. And in fact greed and avarice are so native to the soil in Crete, that they are the only people in the world among whom no stigma attaches to any sort of gain whatever... Cretans by their ingrained avarice are engaged in countless public and private seditions, murders and civil wars... you could find no habits prevailing in private life more steeped in treachery than those in Crete..."²

Now, what's even more amazing is that Paul identifies himself with these Cretans...

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. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 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, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3-7)

The word that we translate "regeneration" here is a compound word in the Greek. It's a combination of the word "*palin*" which means "renew or make new again" and the word "*genesias*" which means "source, origin or birth." It literally means "the restoration of a thing to its pristine, original state." How far are you now from the person God created you to be?

The enemy comes at night and whispers accusations. "So, this is who you really are: a failure, a coward, a loser and, above all, a traitor. God is done with you. He's had enough. He's written you off. Curse Him and be done with it."

But don't believe it! These are just more of his lies. Here's what's true...

... when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness but according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit ...(Titus 3:4-5)

If you acknowledge your sin and ask to be forgiven, He will make you new again. And one day:

... We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (1 Cor. 15:51-52)

In this life we are daily washed and renewed by the Holy Spirit. But one day, the change will last forever. This is who you are: not a failure, not hopelessly broken; but a Wonder of Creation, regenerated, washed clean by the Holy Spirit and made new. Let's pray.

¹ www.gty.org/library/articles/A189/is-god-responsible-for-evil

² www.lillenas.com/vcmedia/2414/1414925pdf