

GOD'S LOVE WAS REVEALED AMONG US IN THIS WAY

“You Must Be Born Again”

by Chris Poblete

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A group of short-term missionaries traveled to an impoverished nation where they were greeted by a pastor at a church building in the middle of the region. The church's property appeared worn down with cracks in the tiled walls and what looked like a thick layer of red dirt covering the entire floor. Making plans to serve the village, one missionary suggested they “spruce up” the church building by scrubbing the floors with soap and warm water.

The pastor laughed and informed the well-meaning volunteer that the floor was made of red clay, patted down and dried in the heat, and that there were no tiles beneath the clay to match the walls. If soap and water were used, it would just turn into mud, and the more you added, the muddier it would get. Embarrassed by his mistake, the missionary then recommended they replace the floor altogether, which the team eventually did for the grateful pastor.

WE NEED TO BE BORN AGAIN

What the church building needed was an entirely new floor made of something

other than dried up mud. The same is true of the human heart—it comes dried up, hard, and dirty, and no amount of scrubbing can help it or prepare it for worship. While it's technically true that church buildings don't need clean floors for Sunday worship, it is true that human beings need a new heart. The only way we receive a new heart is by being made new, or born again.

This “new birth” the Bible speaks of is necessary because we are all sinners by nature and choice. Some of the first words that come out of a child's mouth after “mama” and “dada” are “no” and “mine.” From our earliest years of development, the human heart is bent toward defiance and self-centeredness.

Elaborating on this grim reality, the apostle Paul described us as “dead” in our sins (Eph. 2:1). The metaphor of “deadness” is appropriate when you consider the parallels between being “spiritually dead” in our sins and being “physically dead” in our bodies. For example, a physically dead person cannot feel his surroundings. He has no eyes to see and no ears to hear. He has

no senses to perceive the world around him. In the same way, part of what it means to be spiritually dead is to be blind and deaf to spiritual things. It is to be unresponsive to the truth, goodness, and beauty of God and to find other things as more interesting—be it a person, a place, a cause, a concern, or some other idol of the heart.

Once the Spirit
“re-births” us to a
new life in Christ,
everything changes.

Jesus spelled out our helplessness when He said that we love the darkness and hate the light (John 3:19). Without God, we are cosmic rebels without a cause. Before God’s holy face, even our best deeds are incomplete, come with wrong motives, and fall short of His glory.

WE CANNOT FIX OURSELVES

There’s a scene in C. S. Lewis’s *The Voyage of the Dawntrader* in which a young boy named Eustace suddenly finds himself in the awesome-yet-unwanted form of a dragon. Eustace finds himself very frustrated. He cannot talk. He cannot play with his cousins. He’s lonely and miserable. Wishing to be a boy again, he tries to shed off his dragon skin, but with each skin that sheds, another dragon hide is revealed underneath. It is only when he allows Aslan, the Christlike lion of Narnia, to claw into his dragon scales and peel them off that the formidable dragon skin is finally shed.

Similarly, we find ourselves trying to fix the brokenness sin brings to our hearts by turning to anything other than Jesus. We move from one functional savior to the next, and it never seems to work or satisfy. The good news for us is that in Jesus, God has come to make us new. He has come to make us born again. He has

come to awaken us to the way of joy, the truth of His Word, and the life we have always longed for.

GOD’S LOVE MAKES US BORN AGAIN

This metaphor of being “born again” might seem perplexing at first, as it certainly was for Nicodemus, but once again we find the biblical metaphor helpful when we consider its implications. How do you know that you were physically born? The answer should be obvious: You’re here! You’re alive! You wouldn’t be here reading this paragraph if you were never born. You wouldn’t appeal to your birth certificate to prove you were born. You would appeal to the fact that you are here, living and breathing and existing. Similarly, the way you know you are spiritually born again is you become alive to the things of God. You once were a slave to your sins, but now you are free to walk in newness of life! It’s not that you no longer sin but that when you do sin, you hate it and it seems unnatural. You once were blind, but now you see.

And once the Spirit “re-births” us to a new life in Christ, everything changes. We begin to seek true satisfaction in Christ alone. We begin to realize that He supplies the living water we’ve thirsted for all our life. None of us deserve this. But Jesus lived and died for undeserving sinners like you and me because He is the very embodiment of God’s amazing love. The good news of God’s love for us is not like Jesus throwing you a life raft in the sea of eternity and you having to reach out and grab it. Instead, you are dead on the bottom of the sea and needing to be quickened to new life. God sent His Son into the world to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins so that our hardened and dirty hearts might be made new and that we might now have new life through Him.



THE SON BRINGS ETERNAL LIFE

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Son came so that people might experience new birth (John 3:1-8).
2. The Son came so that people might have eternal life (John 3:9-16).
3. The Son came so that people might escape condemnation (John 3:17-21).

Background Passage: John 3

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Jesus came to earth so that those who believe in Him would escape condemnation and have eternal life.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Jesus taught that new birth, not religious activity, is how a person enters the kingdom of God and receives eternal life. New birth is given from the Father through faith in the Son as a work of the Spirit. Because of God's love, we are no longer condemned by our sin, but we have been given eternal life in Christ.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been born again and have new life in Christ, we live with eternity in view as we prioritize calling others to be born again.

GROUP TIME



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: John began his Gospel helping his readers understand that Jesus is God and pre-existed at creation and was active in creation. He continued with John the Baptist and his pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God. He then moved to the beginning of Jesus's ministry as He gathered disciples. In chapter 2, Jesus turned water into wine and began to show people how He is able to transform things in His power for His glory. His zeal for the Lord is unmatched. Chapter 3, then, begins with one of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, approaching Jesus at night. Nicodemus wanted to talk with Jesus about the signs Jesus was doing.

EXPLAIN: Sometimes there are words that people use in the church that are unfamiliar to the new believer or to the world around us. Some of us grew up with an understanding of these words and others of us did not.

DISCUSS: What comes to your mind when you hear the words *born again?* (someone who is a church-goer; someone who is a Christian; people that relate to a particular political movement; someone spiritual or Spirit-filled; I have no idea what that means)

TRANSITION: In John 2, Jesus performed signs revealing His identity as the Messiah. Right before our text in chapter 3, it says that Jesus “knew what was in man” (John 2:25). Jesus knows what consumes us—our desires, our sin, our hope. Over the next few chapters of John's Gospel, Jesus has a number of conversations in which He reveals His knowledge of what each individual needs and His purpose for coming to fulfill those needs.



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POINT 1

THE SON CAME SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT EXPERIENCE NEW BIRTH (JOHN 3:1-8).

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” **4** Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” **5** Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **John 3:1-8** from his or her own Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-3** commentary to set up the following explanation for the key doctrine of regeneration or rebirth—being born again (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

KEY DOCTRINE #69: Regeneration: Regeneration takes place at the **beginning** of the Christian life and is the miraculous transformation, or the new birth, that takes place within an individual through the supernatural work of the **Holy Spirit** (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5). It is the divine side of conversion (a person turning to Christ in repentance and faith), being the work of God within a person’s life that causes him or her to be born again, a work that human effort is **unable** to produce.

DISCUSS: How should a biblical understanding of regeneration inform our evangelism? (in evangelism, our goal is to be faithful in presenting the gospel, but God does the work of salvation; people need to understand their sinfulness and their need to be made new; regeneration cannot be coerced)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 4-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Both the Old and the New Testament speak of the need to be made **new** in the power of God’s Spirit through a spiritual **cleansing** of sin.

TRANSITION: Jesus came to earth so that people might experience new birth. We have seen why people must be born again, and now we will look at how people might have eternal life.

NOTES

PHARISEE

From an Aramaic word meaning “separated,” a Pharisee was a member of a Jewish group who felt they were separate from the elitists, commoners, and Gentiles of their times. They adhered to the strict rules of the Mosaic Law, even adding to it to secure religious purity.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“And indeed from the Spirit comes our New Birth, and from the New Birth our new creation, and from the new creation our deeper knowledge of the dignity of Him from Whom it is derived.”¹

—Gregory of Nazianzen (c. 329-390)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-3 / John 3 opens with a man named Nicodemus, who is described as a Pharisee and **“a ruler of the Jews.”** This means that Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish governing body called the Sanhedrin. He was someone that the Jewish people looked up to. He was in a position of leadership and likely had riches. In John 19:39, he brings expensive spices to anoint Jesus’s body for the tomb after the crucifixion. In addition to being a leader in the community, he would have been known for his morality, being a Pharisee. Nicodemus was a man the community thought had it all—authority, money, and morality.

Nicodemus went to Jesus **“by night.”** The themes of light and darkness are evident all throughout the Gospel of John. Often physical darkness hints at the presence of spiritual darkness. This event taking place at night alluded to the fact that Nicodemus was lost in spiritual darkness, but he was searching. Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus as a rabbi and teacher and saw the **“signs”** Jesus was doing. He surmised, with some skepticism, that one couldn’t do such things **“unless God is with him.”** Jesus responded with the same word “unless”: **“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** With each “unless” there is an unspoken question being asked: “Is God really with you?” as asked by Nicodemus, and, “Are you really born again?” by Jesus. Jesus was in a teaching moment with Nicodemus.

VERSES 4-8 / Nicodemus was confused by what Jesus meant, so he asked, **“How can a man be born when he is old?”** Being born again was a new and strange concept. Jesus, however, was not speaking about a physical birth; He was speaking about something deeper: a spiritual birth. But two questions arise out of this statement by Jesus: 1) *Why does one need to be born again?* and 2) *How is one born again?*

In response to why, all people need to be born again because of our sinfulness—how we do things in the flesh, satisfying

our sinful desires instead of God’s desires. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they did not just break a rule, they corrupted human nature at its core. All people are dead in their sins and in rebellion to God when born into this world (Eph. 2:1-3). Our sinful nature is the reason why we need to be born again and made new. Our behavior, however good, will always miss the mark of God’s perfect holiness.

And how is one born again? Jesus explained, **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”** Jesus was speaking of a spiritual birth that cleanses us from sin and brings life to where there was only death. This was clear in the Old Testament, and Nicodemus should have known that. In verse 10, Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for being a teacher of Israel yet not knowing what Jesus was talking about. In the Old Testament, water and spirit often were used to signify a cleansing from impurity and the transformation of the heart that enables God’s people to follow Him faithfully. In Ezekiel 36:25-27, the Lord said that He would cleanse His people with water and give them a new spirit, putting His Spirit in them. Jesus was pointing Nicodemus back to this teaching of new birth that was evident in Ezekiel.

Jesus’s telling Nicodemus that he needed to be born again to be a part of God’s kingdom would have been shocking to him. Nicodemus already thought he was a part of God’s kingdom. If there ever were someone whom the Jews thought would be a part of the kingdom, it would have been a man like Nicodemus. Yet entrance into God’s kingdom does not come about by anything we can do, only by what God has done. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you have, whether good or bad, all need to be born again. To be born again is more than simply a reformation of one’s character; it is to be completely changed and made new by the power of the gospel that cleanses and purifies and puts the Holy Spirit within you.

POINT 2

THE SON CAME SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE (JOHN 3:9-16).

NOTES

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10** Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? **11** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **John 3:9-16** from his or her own Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 9-15** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Jesus used an Old Testament story to teach that **all** those who look to **Him** in **faith** will be saved from their sins and given eternal life.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 16** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God’s **love** is seen in that He did not leave the world in its sin but sent His only **Son** so that all who believe in Him would not **perish** but live eternally.

DISCUSS: What is the present reality and future expectation for one who doesn’t believe in Jesus? (separation from God in this life and the next; likely a lack of purpose; a sense of hopelessness for meaning; dead in sins; God’s judgment for sin leading to eternity in hell)

TRANSITION: Continuing on in Jesus’s teaching to Nicodemus, we see a fuller gospel message, one that includes both God’s love and His holiness. Only through Jesus can one be saved. Apart from Him, no one can.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 9-15 / In the previous section, Jesus taught on the need to be born again. Here we see where the new birth that brings eternal life is found. Nicodemus was still confused about Jesus's talk of being born again and being born of the Spirit, so he asked, **"How can these things be?"**

Jesus then explained how He and His disciples, and those who believe, testify to what they have seen, including the fulfillment of prophecies and the signs and miracles Jesus was performing. But the Pharisees, and Nicodemus as their representative at this point, did **"not receive [their] testimony."** Jesus pointed to the fact that even the signs He was doing on earth weren't enough to get some to believe. Those who didn't believe these earthly signs wouldn't understand the deeper **"heavenly things."** Then pointing to His deity and understanding of the heavenlies, Jesus identified Himself as the Son of Man who has descended from heaven and will ascend into heaven.

Then in verses 14-15, Jesus pointed Nicodemus to where new birth and eternal life are found: they are found in looking to the Son of Man, who must **"be lifted up."** The statement of Jesus being "lifted up" refers to Jesus being lifted up on the cross, as well as to His resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God the Father.

Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the story of Moses and the serpents that afflicted the people of Israel (Num. 21:7-9). After God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and provided for their needs in the wilderness, they began to grumble and complain. God sent a plague of venomous snakes upon them to judge them and many people died. The people then repented, and God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole. Those who were bitten by the snakes would look to the bronze serpent and God would heal them. In the wilderness, God graciously gave the people a way to be delivered from their sins. Jesus showed how the deliverance

God gave the people in the wilderness was meant to be a picture of the salvation He came to bring to the world. In a similar way to how the Israelites in the desert needed to look to the bronze serpent to be healed of their snake bites, so do all need to look to Christ in faith to be delivered from the punishment for our sin. The good news of Jesus Christ being lifted up on the cross shows that people who have been infected by the poison of sin that goes to the depths of their souls can look to Jesus Christ and find salvation.

VERSE 16 / So why would God do this? **"For God so loved the world."** Jesus spelled it out for Nicodemus: God's love is so full for **"the world"** that He **"gave His only Son"** so that those who believe in Him would have **"eternal life."**

This was an interesting wording for the Jews, who mainly associated God's love with His covenant people, Israel.² Yet God's love was for the world, for those who were Jews and those who were Gentiles. He gave His Son for them all. But they still had to choose to believe or not.

John 3:16 is one of the most popular verses, but it is likely one of the most misquoted as well. Some will focus purely on God's love in order to excuse people for their sin. Others will try to say that because of God's love, everyone will have eternal life, skipping **"whoever believes."** God's love, however, is never meant to be an excuse to sin. Rather, it is meant to drive us to true belief. As we will see in the next point, humans deserve God's righteous judgment for their sin, but the good news of the gospel is that God has not left His people in their sin but has provided eternal life through His Son.

There are only two categories of people: 1) those who believe and have eternal life and 2) those who do not believe and will perish. This should cause us to live out our mission of telling people the good news of Jesus Christ and the hope of eternal life.

POINT 3

THE SON CAME SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT ESCAPE CONDEMNATION (JOHN 3:17-21).

NOTES

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. **20** For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. **21** But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **John 3:17-21** from his or her own Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 17-18** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Our sin **condemns** us, but God sent His Son, Jesus, to **save** us and those in the world who would believe.

DISCUSS: Why should we not brush aside sins, even “small” ones? (God cannot stand sin because He is holy; sin corrupts; even though we are saved, sin breaks our fellowship with God and displeases Him; sin hinders our sanctification process; sin leads to more sin when unconfessed; being captive to sin is not God’s desire for us—He longs for us to flourish and live a life of joy free from the power of sin)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19-21** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Though human beings tend to run to the darkness, when we live by God’s truth, trusting in **Jesus**, we show that we are in the light because of God’s **work** in us.

DISCUSS: Why is sin so tempting and desirable at times? (we have desires we want to fulfill; we are impatient and want immediate gratification; we think our desires will truly satisfy us and make us happy apart from God’s truth; Satan and the world fool us into thinking sin is worth it and not that big of a deal)

CONDEMNATION

Because humans cannot live up to God’s holy standards because of our sin and sinful nature, we stand condemned, separated from God for eternity. We deserve condemnation because God is holy and just and cannot stand unrighteousness. But God has provided a way of salvation through His Son, Jesus. For those who trust in Jesus and repent of their sin, there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

COMMENTARY

VERSES 17-18 / John continued to explain the mission that Christ was sent to the world to accomplish, namely, to bring salvation to the world. Christ came into this world to accomplish what no one could. No amount of human wisdom, philosophy, or morality could bring about salvation. Men and women are dead in their sins, and nothing could rescue them, except Jesus.

Do you find it fascinating that Jesus's mission in coming into the world was not to bring condemnation? Why did Jesus not bring condemnation? Verse 18 helps explain: **"But whoever does not believe is condemned already."** The world, due to its sinfulness, is already under the condemnation and judgment of God. Christ did not need to come into the world and declare it is condemned because He was sent to save this lost and already condemned world.

In verses 16-18, we see an emphasis on belief **"in"** and **"through"** Christ. **"In"** appears three times, and **"through"** once. John was showing the primacy of believing in the Son. It is in and through Christ that we believe and are saved. Humans cannot believe in themselves to be saved, nor can they believe in some politician or political party. Salvation comes only through believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 18 again reveals two groups: those who believe and those who do not—those who are saved because of their belief and those who do not believe and are condemned. There are many today who do not like to talk about condemnation and judgment. There are some who struggle with the idea that God is both loving and yet He condemns sin. But in that fact lies the key: God condemns sin because He is loving. He wants the best for us and knows sin corrupts us. If He did not condemn sin and evil, how could He be a good and loving God? We must not shy away from teaching both the love of God for sinners and His just condemnation of sin.

VERSES 19-21 / Have you ever been in a dark room and turned on a light? When the light turns on, things that were hidden in the darkness have now been exposed. Similarly, when Jesus, the light of the world, came down from heaven, the darkness was pushed back and sin was fully exposed.

Due to the fact that God is good and holy, He must judge the world. Part of that judgment is that **"the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil"** (John 3:19). Jesus is the light of the world (8:12). When Jesus came into the world, His light exposed the world's dark sinfulness. Earlier, John's Gospel says of Jesus, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:4). The evil of human beings is demonstrated in that they run from the light—they run from Christ. Instead of running to eternal life, sinful human beings would rather run toward condemnation.

Even Christians may be tempted to run from Christ, to run from the light. Are you tempted to hide sin? Instead of running to the light of Christ and forgiveness that is found in Him alone, are you tempted to cover up your evil? Those who love the darkness are people who are not willing to live and act in truth. These are people who value their own pride more than the light and life of Christ. Christians should not be those who cover up sin and flee from the light. They should be people of purity, integrity, and truthfulness, knowing that the transformative work in them is being **"carried out in God."**

John 3 shows us God's love in giving His only Son, proclaims Jesus's mission to bring salvation, and confronts our condemned condition that leads to death. How should we respond? There are only two ways: you either believe in Jesus or you reject Him. You either run from the light or you run to it. You either run from Christ or you run to Him and be saved.

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been born again and have new life in Christ, we live with eternity in view as we prioritize calling others to be born again.

NOTES

HEAD:

Jesus came on a mission to this earth in order to bring new birth and eternal life for all who would believe in Him. Those who believe in Jesus Christ will escape eternal condemnation in hell. Jesus has called us to believe in Him for eternal life because of His love for us, the Father's love for us, and the Spirit's love for us. God's mission has always been clear: to save humankind so we can spend eternity with Him.

How have you heard about God's love in Christ? Experienced God's love? Come to believe in Jesus as the saving gift of God's love?

HEART:

God loves us. He does not simply accept us—He loves us! This truth should amaze us. When we think about our sinfulness, we should be moved by the love of God for us. We should be able to sing out, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" We are known by God and loved by Him. When we think about how costly the love of God was—the sacrifice of God's only Son—we should seek to confess our sin, trust in the forgiveness of the God who loves us, and do our best, relying on the Spirit's power, to resist the temptation to sin again.

What sins are tempting you this week that you will ask God to strengthen you to overcome?

HANDS:

We who, apart from Christ, are destined for perishing and condemnation are able to receive the hope of eternal life through believing in Jesus Christ. This new birth and eternal life come as a free gift from God. This world is under condemnation and deserving of God's wrath, but God has a plan to bring redemption to all who would believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus's coming to this earth on the mission to bring eternal life to sinners who believe in Him should serve as a motivation for our mission of making "disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19).

How does knowing that everyone who does not believe in Jesus is already condemned (John 3:18) motivate you to be courageous in your witness to the gospel?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Our Redeemer and Maker, who was Son of God before the ages, became Son of man at the end of ages. Thus the one who, through the power of his divinity, had created us to enjoy the happiness of everlasting life, might himself restore us, through the weakness of our humanity, to recover the life we had lost."³

—Bede (c. 673-735)

POINT 1: THE SON CAME SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT EXPERIENCE NEW BIRTH (JOHN 3:1-8).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“[Nicodemus] was a Pharisee. One of the primary characteristics of the Pharisees was their seriousness. They were so earnest about their faith that on the Sabbath they would carry no more food than the weight of a dried fig or no more milk than could be swallowed at one gulp lest they break the Sabbath-rest. They were serious about their faith! Of course, that got them into some rather ridiculous situations. For instance, it was determined that on the Sabbath one could not tie a knot in a rope, but a woman could tie a knot in her sash. So if a man wanted to get water out of a well and there was nothing tied to the bucket, he could tie his wife’s sash to the bucket. Ridiculous? Yes, but desperately fervent! They were not religious dilettantes! Nicodemus was not playing games, and that was one of the reasons he was receptive to Jesus’ explanation. Nicodemus was ‘a member of the Jewish ruling council.’ That means he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a group of seventy men, both lay and clerical, who had jurisdiction over every Jew on earth. In addition, our Lord’s identification of Nicodemus in verse 10 as ‘Israel’s teacher’ may mean Nicodemus was considered to be the greatest teacher in Jerusalem. There is some evidence that he came from a very aristocratic family that traced its bloodline back to the Maccabees.”⁴

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Prior to your group time, enlist a volunteer to search for a string of pictures on the internet that display the life cycle of a butterfly. Determine the best way to show these to your group, whether on a TV screen, a computer screen, or texting a link to your group members so they can view the pictures on their own mobile device.

Say: Caterpillars are such interesting creatures. They start as these ugly, crawling, oblong creatures, unable to do much but crawl and eat and crawl and eat. Yet eventually, they become a pupa and envelope themselves into a cocoon. Then they become butterflies, beautiful and powerful, being able to fly and pollinate flowers. If God can transform these little creatures so mightily, how much more grand is our transformation and regeneration when we are born again!

POINT 2: THE SON CAME SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE (JOHN 3:9-16).

+ COMMENTARY

“Nicodemus’s third and final question is rhetorical in the narrative. ‘How can this be?’ likely disguises a thoroughgoing and lengthy inquiry by the rabbi, whose religious categories have now been upended. He is baffled. He is disturbed. His commitment to the Torah and obedience, to prayer and sacrifice, and his understanding of election, responsibility, and privilege have all been challenged. He should have no problem understanding that the Spirit of God can transform; but he is a man standing on the frontier, looking at a new country and wondering how such momentous events will unfold. For the third (and final) time Jesus begins his answer with (lit.) ‘Truly, truly I say to you,’ as if to underscore the importance of what he is about to say (3:3, 5, 11). The irony of his response is that he refers to Nicodemus as a rabbi (3:10), just as Nicodemus had referred to Jesus (3:2), but now we see that this teacher does not know the answers. Jesus is the only ‘true rabbi’ who can explain the deeper mysteries of God.”⁵

+ COMMENTARY

“Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for his blindness (3:9-10). He then contrasted Nicodemus’ ‘we know’ (3:2) with his own we know in 3:11a. Here the ‘we’ Jesus speaks of most probably refers to his followers, who speak of what we know, and . . . testify to what we have seen. However, the ‘we’ may also refer to the joint testimony of the Father and the Son, as in passages like 5:31-32 and 8:13-18 . . . As the Son of Man, the only person who came from heaven, Jesus is the prime revealer of the knowledge of God (3:13 . . .). People find it difficult to understand the mystery of the Spirit and of rebirth, and so Jesus offered another lesson. He reminded Nicodemus of the story of Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the wilderness. The Israelites who looked to it in faith were saved from death (Num. 21:4-9). This incident offers an analogy for Jesus’ role and for saving faith. Just as the bronze snake was lifted up on a pole, so too Jesus will be lifted up—on the cross (3:14; see 8:28; 12:32). And just as turning in faith to look at the bronze snake brought healing and life to those who had been bitten by snakes, so turning to Jesus in faith would transfer people from darkness to light and eternal life (3:15). People like Nicodemus must choose to turn to Jesus and truly believe to receive eternal life.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

In Greek mythology, Asclepius is known as the god of healing or of medicine, and he is pictured as carrying a rod with a snake on it. But before him, the story of God healing the Israelites in the wilderness with a snake on a rod through Moses had already been circulating. Similar images and storylines do not negate the validity of God’s Word. Today, the symbol of the World Health Organization and other medical services is a snake on a rod. Its origins may be derived from Greek mythology, but we can point to the more ancient and true story of Moses and the ultimate Healer who continues to heal today, not only physically but spiritually in the lives of His beloved creation, humankind. Because of God’s love and grace, we know that God desires to heal us through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

POINT 3: THE SON CAME SO THAT PEOPLE MIGHT ESCAPE CONDEMNATION (JOHN 3:17-21).

+ COMMENTARY

“The essence of this self-incurred condemnation is pictured in the metaphorical terms, light and darkness. The verdict . . . is entirely negative in vv. 19–20. Light has come into the world; with the incarnation of the Word, the light shone in the darkness . . . even more brightly than at the creation. As the light of the world (8:12), Jesus is the revelation of God and the objectification of divine holiness and purity. But men loved darkness instead of light: they preferred to live without such knowledge of God, without such brilliant purity. The reason was fundamentally moral: *their deeds were evil*. They were not willing to live by the truth; they valued their pride more than their integrity, their prejudice more than contrite faith. Worse, anyone in this camp hates the light and refuses to come to it for fear that his deeds will be exposed . . . The verb suggests not only exposure but shame and conviction . . . The purpose of these three verses [3:19-21], then, is not to encourage readers to think they fall into a deterministic category bound up with their intrinsic nature, but to make them see the imminence of their danger (the verdict is being declared), and the fundamentally moral reasons why people hate the light. John stresses these points in the hope that his readers will beseech God that all they do may be done through him—in short, that they will turn to the ‘lifted up’ Son of Man with the same simple, desperate, unqualified faith as the Israelites displayed who turned to the bronze snake in the desert (vv. 13–15). By such faith and such faith alone can anyone experience the new birth (vv. 3, 5) and thereby gain eternal life (vv. 15–16).”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

“God needs our light where the world is the darkest. The blacker the night, the greater the need for a light bulb. If the bulb does not shine, it’s not because of the darkness. Darkness cannot put out a light. If the darkness increases until it is black as a cave, it is still not dark enough to extinguish a light. No one has yet smothered a light by increasing the darkness. Darkness gets darker because the light fails. When we fail to reflect Christ’s light, we let the darkness win.”⁸

Jesus is the light that came into the world to save people from darkness. As believers, we are to reflect the light of Jesus to help others out of the darkness as well. Through the work of the Holy Spirit and through the truth of His Word, our mission is to align with God’s mission in helping people get out of the darkness as they encounter the true Light of the world, Jesus Christ.

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