

Lesson 2: A New Birth

Key concept
New life in Jesus

Bible study
John 3:1-15

Memory verses
Ephesians 4:22-24

Objectives

- ❖ Understand the meaning of spiritual rebirth
- ❖ Understand how spiritual rebirth happens

Bible Study

Following Jesus isn't about becoming a better person. It isn't about kicking an old addiction or cleaning up your act. It isn't about going to church or being religious. It is, however, about experiencing a whole new spiritual reality. It is about dead things coming to life. It is about complete personal transformation that begins with a new spiritual power (called the Holy Spirit) giving birth to a new you. That is what we will explore through our story about Nicodemus in John 3:1-15.

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council" (v.1).

Here you have a religious man, a Pharisee, who is a member of the Jewish ruling council. In our church, he would be what we call a ruling elder. Ruling elders haven't been to seminary, but are called by God to rule, oversee and serve the church. That was Nicodemus. And there were 70 of these men in all of Israel on the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin.

"He came to Jesus at night" (v.2).

Nicodemus comes under the cloak of darkness because he knows what will happen if rumors get around that he is making friends with the enemy. Can't you just see it. He goes and gets his camo robe on, paints his face, and is ducking under the balsam trees so nobody on the ruling council gets wind that he is going to talk to Jesus. The Sanhedrin considers Jesus the enemy because they think he is stirring up the people against them and spreading lies about God.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Nicodemus is a bit confused. "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (v.2-4).

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My young daughter asked my wife recently, “How does a baby get out of your tummy?” She was trying to understand physical birth. Nicodemus, though he is a grown man, is young in spiritual matters; his thought process is a bit like my daughter’s in reverse. He is thinking, “Ok, I know how babies get out, but surely you can’t be talking about going back in the way I came out and doing that fetal position thing again for nine months.”

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (v.5).

Jesus is talking about entering a new reality—the kingdom of God. A new reality requires a new identity, and that transformation happens through water and spirit. Don’t think baptism here. That wouldn’t have been in Nicodemus’ mind when Jesus says this, even though it comes into some of ours when we read it. Jesus isn’t saying you must be baptized to enter into the kingdom of God. We know this for sure because the thief on the cross wasn’t baptized and he entered into the kingdom of God. No, remember their context. The Middle East is a dry, arid climate. Think El Cajon or Santee, but without any air-conditioners or irrigation. So, water brought life. This is why, over and over again, the Bible says that the Spirit of God is like water because it is life-giving.

And to clarify this connection between water and Spirit Jesus says, “*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit*” (v.6-8).

Jesus is talking about a new birth into the kingdom of God that has nothing to do with going into or coming out of the womb of a woman. God, who is a Spirit, will give birth to you spiritually. You will be born again, spiritually.

Now, this was troubling for Nicodemus. He asks, “*How can this be?*” (v.9) This is the very question most of us would have asked at this point. Or we would have said, “What do you mean?” Or, “Huh?” So, let’s press the *Pause* button on this conversation and try to understand, as Nicodemus had to do, what it would mean to be born again, born of the Spirit.

Even though we’re talking about a spiritual change, it takes place in the context of our physical circumstances—our friends and family, and our work and social activities. This was true for Nicodemus too. Remember, Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark of night wearing his camo robe. For Nicodemus to make a different choice than all of his peers in the Sanhedrin, who were strongly opposed to Jesus, was a pretty difficult decision.

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All of us have felt the effect of the opinions of the people around us in our spiritual journey. A friend of mine here in San Diego once asked me, “You aren’t one of those born-againers are you?” I get his point because there is a breed of ‘born-againers’ that I would not want to be identified with. But just because there are certain people who are born-again Christians that I personally find odd doesn’t mean that there is something wrong with the reality or experience of being born again. Think about it.

One of my favorite college football teams is the University of Alabama, and I am a big fan. There are lots of Alabama football fans that are a little nutty; one of them poisoned the trees on Toomers Corner in Auburn last year after Auburn beat Alabama. He will be in jail for a long time. But, that doesn’t mean I ditch Alabama football because there are nutty fans. Likewise, don’t ditch Jesus and the reality of a born again spiritual experience because of some odd born-againers that you know or have read about in the newspaper.

Or, think about it from another perspective. Some people say, “I am just not the born-again type.” And they have a picture in mind of what born-again people are like, and it typically isn’t pretty. Born-againers are often painted as non-thinking people. First of all, they aren’t very smart. And beyond that, their lives are just, well, miserable in many ways, and they are looking for a way to cope with their difficult lives. Karl Marx, a socialist thinker, painted this picture for us. He said religious experiences and religion in general is an “opiate for the masses.” It is for poor people, for people whose lives are miserable and who use religion to medicate, to mask the symptoms of their horrible life.

But that doesn’t explain Nicodemus at all, does it? Nicodemus was rolling. He was influential, successful, powerful—he was one of 70 who were tasked with overseeing the nation of Israel. He was a political and religious big shot. And he became born again.

Other people say, “No, that isn’t my problem with born-againers. My problem is that I think the whole thing is just a show. I think people become born again Christians because they have an agenda.” Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, painted this picture for us. Nietzsche said religion is “a will to power.” It could be to get votes, convince your parole officer, or impress a girlfriend. Admittedly, a will to power may explain why Nicodemus was involved in the religion of Judaism. It put him in power; he was among the ruling elite in Israel.

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A will to power does not, however, explain why Nicodemus would become a born again follower of Jesus because, in doing so, Nicodemus was forfeiting power. He was giving it up. He wasn't doing this to gain power, but rather he had a new experience in his heart that compelled him to give up the former kind of power he had known. And, in the end, the ruling elite that he was apart of, his friends and family, killed him for defecting and following Jesus.

Many people might respond to all of this by saying, "Yeah, but that is just the problem. I don't want to be like Nicodemus and go through this radical life change. I like who I am and I like my life." If this is your response, imagine that you had one of the old school TVs from the 1950s. You know, the black and white ones that took up half the living room. I remember going to my grandmom's house when I was a little kid and she had one of those TVs. You turned a knob and there was a click. A little dot came up in the middle of the TV. Other than this dot, there really was no sign that the TV was turned on. Then we would all talk, go into another room, eat dinner, and after dinner we would come back and see that the TV was finally getting warmed up. And then, through the snow, a picture finally emerged.

Now, imagine that you could time travel back to the '50s with one of the new flat screen TVs. And you told the guy watching the black and white screen, "Listen, I want to usher you into a whole new reality of watching television. It will be like you are watching television for the very first time. It won't just be in black and white, but there will be color. And not just color, there will be depth..." And you begin to talk to him about high definition, and you see his eyes glaze over because he has never seen or experienced high def, and, well, you sound a little nutty.

Admittedly, to talk about being born again to someone who hasn't been born again will sound nutty. As Jesus says, "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*" (v.3). He is telling Nicodemus that he doesn't have eyes to see it yet. There is a hidden reality to the kingdom of God, and the only way Nicodemus or anyone else will ever see it is if they experience it.

But how does this born again experience happen? This is where we hit the *Play* button and pick up the conversation where we left off. Nicodemus was asking, "*How can this be?*" (v.9). "*You are Israel's teacher,*" said Jesus, "*and you do not understand these things?*" (v.10).

Jesus is a bit perturbed with Nicodemus. He is a ruling elder who is supposed to be leading and shepherding others into a life-giving relationship with God, and he doesn't even have that relationship. He hasn't experienced God's Spirit in his heart.

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“I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (v.11-15).

Jesus brings up the snake incident in the desert to help Nicodemus understand the new birth. What Jesus is referencing here is in the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 21, where the Israelites were moaning and complaining about the food God was sending them in the desert. So, God disciplines them by sending snakes among them, and people are getting bitten and dying from the snakebites. They cry out to God, and God says to Moses, “Put a bronze snake on a pole and all who look to the snake on the pole will live.” Now, obviously, the snake had no magical power. The point God was making to the people was this: Will you trust me to bring salvation? Will you trust me when I say that I give it to you as a gift and that it comes when you put your faith in me, not through anything you can do on your own? And the only way salvation can happen is if Jesus suffers the curse of the snake, if he is hung on a pole (the cross) in your place.

Jesus did hang on a cross, and he died there. In fact, shortly after his death is the next time we hear about Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus again, this time as a man with spiritual power ready to serve the one who gave him new life. He comes to help prepare Jesus’ body for burial, a task that was normally done by women or slaves.

“Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night” (John 19:38, 39).

And then, three days after Nicodemus and Joseph laid Jesus’ body in a tomb, Jesus rose from the grave. He was dead, and he came to life again, so that all who trust in him can have a new birth as well.

Following Jesus is about experiencing a whole new spiritual reality. It is about dead things coming to life. It is about complete personal transformation that begins with the Holy Spirit giving birth to a new you. Jesus is alive and transforming people. If you are skeptical, ask yourself: Is what I put my trust in more compelling? Or maybe, just maybe, should I put my trust in Jesus and see if he has the ability to transform me and those around me?

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Memory Verses

*You were taught,
with regard to your
former way of life,
to put off your old
self, which is being
corrupted by its
deceitful desires; to
be made new in the
attitude of your
minds; and to put
on the new self,
created to be like
God in true
righteousness and
holiness.*
-Ephesians 4:22-24

Harbor Mid-City
Followers Forming
Followers
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Individual Study and Group Discussion

Opening Questions

Based upon the reading, what did you find most helpful? Was anything confusing? What was most challenging?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he acknowledged that God must be with Jesus because of the miracles he had been doing (v.2). Why do you think Jesus responded the way he did (v.3, 5-8)?
2. Who are the people that Jesus is referring to in verse 11, and what is “the testimony” that they do not accept?
3. Is the example that Jesus gives of the snake in the desert helpful to you in understanding the reason for Jesus’ death on the cross (v.14-15, Numbers 21)?
4. What does love have to do with this interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus? (Consider John 3:16, the well-known next verse after the section for this study.)
5. Was there a time in your life when, like Nicodemus, you had questions about who Jesus really is? If so, how did you find answers to your questions?
6. How would you describe the idea of being spiritually born again to someone who is not a follower of Jesus?