

Jesus Teaches About New Birth

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Jesus taught that the new birth is a gift from the Father and the work of the Spirit for all who believe in the Son.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: John 3:1-21

When he was three years old, a little boy named Kendall showed signs of Kawasaki disease, a rare and potentially fatal condition that causes inflammation in blood vessels and can damage the heart. On his second day in the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Kendall's eyes suddenly rolled to the side and he stopped breathing. He had a heart attack, and an aneurysm on one of his swollen arteries burst, filling his chest cavity with blood. Since Kendall was at the hospital, he survived with immediate surgery, but his heart was damaged beyond repair. Yet within a week, Kendall had received a donor heart and is alive and healthy today.¹



What thoughts and feelings might you have if you needed a new heart and then received one?

Group Time

Point 1: New birth is a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8).

³ Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ “How can anyone be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked him. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. ⁸ The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Our flesh is fallen, diseased with sin. Since God is holy, He cannot have sin in His kingdom. This presents an obvious problem for us: **We are sinful; thus, we cannot enter the kingdom of God as we are.** Jesus made it clear that our sin problem is one we cannot solve on our own. We cannot give ourselves a spiritual new birth any more than a dog can make herself give birth to a kitten. New birth is a work of the Spirit; it is not a physical experience but a spiritual one in which we are transformed and changed so that our nature starts to align with God’s nature.

Regeneration is the miraculous _____, or the new birth, that takes place within an individual through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. It is the _____ side of conversion, being the work of God within a person’s life that causes him or her to be _____, a work that human effort is unable to produce.

The Old Testament foreshadowed the new birth that would one day come in the Spirit. New birth in the Spirit had always been God’s plan, a permanent solution to the sin problem the law only temporarily addressed. Nicodemus, as a Pharisee and a teacher of the law, should have recognized this.



How has the storyline of the Bible through the Old Testament demonstrated the need for the new birth?

Point 2: New birth comes through faith in the Son of God (John 3:9-15).

⁹ “How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.

¹⁰ “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Jesus replied.

¹¹ “Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man.

¹⁴ “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

We often rely on learning from the knowledge of people who have become experts in their field. But only Jesus could provide the necessary teaching to answer Nicodemus’s question “How can these things be?” Jesus alone was able to explain the new birth, and His teaching is certainly trustworthy because He has divine authority. He has come down to us from heaven and possesses wisdom beyond our wildest imagination. As the eternally begotten Son of God, Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. His authority is unshakable and more worthy of trust than the most educated of our earthly teachers.



What are some reasons we should trust Jesus’ teaching?

The answer to Nicodemus’s question “How can these things be?” is Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus, like the bronze snake, was lifted up on the cross, both physically and figuratively. He was physically elevated on the cross, raised up on the beams of wood, which played into His figurative elevation at the cross, being raised up by God for a time of suffering to accomplish our salvation. Just as the bronze snake was the conduit of God’s love and grace to heal the Israelites, so Jesus is the demonstration of God’s love and grace to save sinners.



Voices from Church History

“Salvation comes through a cross and a crucified Christ. Salvation is the fellowship with the crucified Christ in the spirit of his cross. Salvation is union with and delight in, salvation is participation in, the humility of Jesus.”²

—Andrew Murray (1828-1917)

Point 3: New birth is a gift from God the Father (John 3:16-18).

¹⁶ For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

The doctrine of the **Trinity** is an important belief for the Christian, and all three Persons of the Trinity—the **Father**, the **Son**, and the **Spirit**—are at work in the new birth of believers. This passage highlights that not only does new birth involve the Spirit and the Son but it originates as a gift from the Father. God the Father gave the gift of His Son for our salvation, and this gift came with a terrible, high price—the death of His one and only Son so that we would not perish in our sin.



What are some ways we should respond to God for the gift of His Son?

John tells us that the reason God sent His one and only Son to die a terrible death and pay the price for our sins was because He loved the world. God loves the world not because the world is lovable but because love is His nature. John tells us explicitly in his first epistle, or letter, that God *is* love (1 John 4:8,16). The posture of His heart is not away from us or against us but rather turned toward us. We have a God who willingly and continually has His arms open wide ready to receive us.

God Is Love: The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a _____ that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn't the giving of earthly goods but the giving of _____ in Christ so that we might become _____ to Him.



How does the loving God of the Bible contrast with the ways the world views Him?

My Mission

Because we have been born again and have new life in Christ, we trust in God's power to continue to transform us and we call others to be born again.

- **How will you respond in faith to the God of love who gave His only Son to save the world?**
- **What are some ways your church/group can reach out to those in your community who are hurting and in need of the good news that God loves them?**
- **What steps will you take toward sharing the gospel of Christ with others this week?**

Voices from the Church

"True love will motivate us to make sacrifices that might even cost us our lives. Such sacrificial love makes God's heart glad. This kind of love is worth it."³

—*Africa Study Bible*

Notes

Daily Study

Day 1: Read John 3:1-2

Nicodemus respected Jesus as a rabbi, although Jesus never was formally trained as one. And he recognized that Jesus was special—that He came from God, performed miracles, and that God was with Him. But notice that Nicodemus stopped short in his understanding of Jesus, which is what Jesus pulled out of him in the conversation that followed. Nicodemus failed to recognize that Jesus was special not because He was from God and that God was with Him but because He is God. Nicodemus failed to reach the point of recognizing his need to turn to Jesus, the Son of God, for salvation.

When it comes to trusting in Jesus, close is not enough. Even today, many people view Jesus as a good teacher, an example of living morally pleasing lives. But that was not Jesus' mission. Rather, Jesus came so that people might come to know that He is the Son of God and have salvation through Him.



In what ways do you need to develop a deeper understanding of who Jesus is?

Day 2: Read John 3:3-8

What exactly being born again means and what Jesus meant by water has challenged theologians for centuries. Even the word translated as “again” in verse 3 is not clear. The Greek word used there could also mean “from above.” This is more than a linguistic nuance; understanding both senses of that word gives the passage its context and reminds us of its basic truth, one that is quite understandable.

When a person trusts in Christ, he or she is born anew spiritually. That is why “from above” is so helpful in addition to “again.” Being born “from above” reminds us that Jesus was speaking of a spiritual truth—that this birth is not the work of the flesh but rather the work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Spirit also guides us to understand truth—all of the truth in Scripture, even the more challenging parts.



What are some doctrines or passages that you struggle to understand? Which have you grown to understand better because of the Spirit's guidance?

Day 3: Read John 3:9-15

The life of new birth that Jesus explained to Nicodemus does not occur automatically—it comes by faith. To illustrate this, Jesus pointed the Jewish teacher to the Book of Numbers, specifically the time when the Israelites were plagued by venomous snakes.

When the Israelites grumbled against God, He disciplined them by sending snakes into their midst. But along with that judgment came mercy and grace; God instructed Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole. Whoever was bitten could look at that serpent—an exercise of faith in God's provision—and be healed.

In the same way, Jesus would be lifted up. But don't miss that the physical raising is not the strongest connection between Jesus and the serpent on the pole. Faith is. Turning to Jesus takes faith. It makes no sense, from a human perspective, that salvation from sin can come from a man who was crucified as a criminal two thousand years ago. Nicodemus had facts, but the new birth entails more than that. Eternal life takes faith.



How is faith needed in your relationship with Jesus after salvation? In what areas of your life do you need to trust Jesus?

Day 4: Read John 3:16-18

It is trendy today to see people as basically good—or at least neutral. This is why so many people balk at the biblical teaching of judgment and hell. The belief is that God is unfair to condemn people to hell because people are basically good. They deserve His grace and forgiveness. Notice the irony of believing you deserve that which is by definition a gift, something that cannot be deserved.

John 3:16 is, perhaps, the best known Bible verse. Even unbelievers are likely to know it. But notice what follows. In the next two verses, Jesus explains that He did not come into the world to condemn it. Why? Because it already is condemned. And with that, the myth of people being basically good and deserving forgiveness falls apart. If anything is not fair, it is not that people are condemned but rather that some people are saved.



How do you tend to see salvation: as something that is deserved or as a free gift of God?

Day 5: Read John 3:19-21

As believers, it is often difficult to understand the world—and it should be. People love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. Don't miss this: People, apart from Jesus, don't dabble in darkness. They don't tolerate darkness. They don't sort of like darkness. They love darkness. They love sin. They love to hate God. And so did we before Christ.

Be grateful when you struggle to understand the world; it is a mark of God at work in you. It is a sign that your new mind is at work, that you have been born again. But at the same time, do not let this separation between you and the world lead you to become arrogant. Remember, the only reason you are now walking in the light is because of the kindness of God—His gift to you in Christ made known to you by the Holy Spirit.



In what ways have you seen your living and thinking change because of the gospel?

Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- New birth is a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8).
- New birth comes through faith in the Son of God (John 3:9-15).
- New birth is a gift from God the Father (John 3:16-18).



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



What can we do to keep one another mindful that the new birth—and salvation as a whole—is a Trinitarian work that reveals a Trinitarian God?



When has the reality of the new birth seemed most evident to you in your own life? In the life of another person?

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A Word from the Editor



Trevin Wax

General Editor—*The Gospel Project*
AUTHOR OF MULTIPLE BOOKS, INCLUDING
*This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in
Light of the Gospel*

With this volume of *The Gospel Project*,
the storyline of the Bible shifts from the
Old Testament to the New, and we enter

the era in which God begins to fulfill His promise of salvation
through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the sessions
that follow, you'll take a closer look at the context surrounding
the birth of Jesus, the theological parallels between Adam and
Jesus (the last Adam), as well as the early ministry of Jesus.

Some of these stories will be familiar to you and the rest of your
group—the Christmas story, for example, or the story of Jesus'
temptation. In the familiar stories, we want to help you see
aspects of the Gospel accounts that you may have overlooked.
In the less familiar stories, we want to help you see the beauty
of Jesus' interaction with all kinds of people with all kinds of
needs and all kinds of backgrounds.

Our hope as you study the Scriptures is that you will be
drawn to worship Jesus as the Savior and Lord who fulfills
God's original intention for us as His people. Here we see a
Jesus withstanding temptation, calling disciples, loving the
unlovable, and battling the evil one. May your worship of this
Savior lead you to faithful obedience to His call in extending
grace and mercy and the message of salvation to those
around you.

EDITOR

UNIT 19

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1. Thabiti Anyabwile, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2018), 40–41.
2. Jen Wilkin, *In His Image* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 107.

SESSION 3

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2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (SCM Press, 2015), 91.

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SESSION 3

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2. Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance* 1.12.53, quoted in *John 1–10*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, vol. IVa in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].

SESSION 4

1. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 14.44, quoted in *Romans*, ed. Gerald Bray, vol. VI in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].
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1. Fred L. Horton Jr., "Exorcism," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2003), 533.
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1. See *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 89.
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2. Andrew Murray, *Humility, in Humility and Absolute Surrender* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 42.
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SESSION 4

1. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on John* 24.23–24, quoted in *John 1–10*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, vol. IVa in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].
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