

The Gospel of John

Lesson 4: You Must Be Born Again: Jesus and Nicodemus -- John 3:1-21

He comes at night, and that detail tells us almost everything we need to know about him. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the ruling council, one of the most respected religious men in Jerusalem. He has spent his life mastering the law, and by every external measure he has arrived. Yet here he is, slipping through the dark streets to find a young teacher from Nazareth, because something in him knows that all his knowledge and all his status have not given him what he is missing. He has come with a careful compliment and a head full of questions, and Jesus cuts straight past all of it to the one thing that matters: "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

You can feel Nicodemus reel. Born again? "How can a man be born when he is old?" He is thinking of the impossible, of climbing back into his mother's womb, and Jesus is talking about something deeper than Nicodemus has ever imagined. Religion can teach a man, reform a man, even make a man respectable, but it cannot give him a new birth. What Jesus is describing is not self-improvement; it is re-creation. Not turning over a new leaf, but receiving a new life. And it must happen, He says, by water and the Spirit, a birth from above that no amount of religious effort can manufacture.

And then, into the dark of that conversation, Jesus speaks the verse the whole world seems to know, the one that has been carried to deathbeds and stadiums and prison cells: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Underneath the new birth is love, the love of a God who would not leave us in our darkness, who gave His one and only Son so that we could be born again into life that never ends. Nicodemus came asking how. Jesus answers by showing him Who, and how much that Who loves him.

This is one of the most important conversations in all of Scripture, because the question Nicodemus is really asking is the question underneath every human heart: How can I be made new? How can someone like me enter the kingdom of God? Jesus does not flatter him, and He will not flatter us. He tells the truth plainly: you must be born again. Read this passage slowly, and do not let your familiarity with the words rob them of their force. Jesus is not describing a self-help program. He is describing a death and a resurrection, a coming up out of the water into a brand new life, and He is offering it to you.

Group Discussion: Nicodemus had religion, knowledge, and standing, yet Jesus told him he still needed to be "born again" (v. 3). Why do you think it is so easy for religious, churchgoing people to mistake knowledge or respectability for the new life Jesus describes?

Personal Reflection: Jesus says the new birth is something that happens to us, not something we achieve. When you think about your own coming to Christ, do you tend to rest in what God

has done to make you new, or do you quietly try to earn your standing? What would it look like to live more fully out of the new life He has given?

Read John 3:1-21

Study Questions

1. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3). What does it mean to be "born again," and why does Jesus insist that no amount of religious knowledge or moral effort can substitute for it?
2. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, cautiously, perhaps afraid of what others would think (v. 2). Where in your life are you tempted to keep your faith quiet or hidden, and what would it look like to come into the light?
3. Jesus says, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (v. 5). How do the Scriptures elsewhere help us understand what it means to be born of water and the Spirit, and how does this connect to the way the New Testament describes coming to Christ?
4. Jesus contrasts the flesh and the Spirit and says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v. 6). Where do you see yourself still trying to live the Christian life in your own strength rather than by the Spirit's work, and what needs to change?
5. Jesus compares the Spirit to the wind, which "blows where it wishes" (v. 8). What does this teach us about the Spirit's work in the new birth, and how does it balance God's initiative with the response He calls us to make?
6. Jesus marvels that Nicodemus, "the teacher of Israel," did not understand these things (v. 10). Are there truths you have known about for years without letting them truly change you? What is one such truth God may be asking you to finally live?
7. Jesus says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (vv. 14-15). How does the bronze serpent of Numbers 21 picture the cross, and what does it teach about how we are saved?
8. John 3:16 says God gave His Son "that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." How does this verse comfort you personally, and how does it move you to share that same love with someone who is still perishing?
9. Jesus says that whoever does not believe "is condemned already" and that people loved "the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (vv. 18-20). How does this passage define saving belief, and how would you explain, from the whole New Testament, that the faith Jesus calls for is a living, obedient faith expressed in repentance, confession, and baptism, rather than mere mental agreement or salvation by faith only?
10. Look back over this conversation, from "you must be born again" to "God so loved the world." What is one specific way Jesus is calling you to live out of your new birth, walking in the light rather than the darkness, this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:36–41, the gospel preached and the response of repentance and baptism; Romans 6:3–7, baptism into Christ's death and rising to walk in newness of life; Titus 3:4–7, salvation through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Spirit; Ezekiel 36:25–27, the promise of cleansing water and a new heart and Spirit; Numbers 21:4–9, the bronze serpent lifted up for the people to look and live.