




Nicodemus and the New Birth

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Regeneration is God's supernatural transformation of believers.

Toy commercials are usually filled with action. They show kids having fun as they play with whatever product is being promoted. But at the end, a narrator usually comes on and makes a disclaimer: "Batteries not included." I'm sure there have been numerous occasions when well-meaning parents or guardians purchased a toy their child wanted without realizing there were no batteries in the box. The kid feels duped, the parent is embarrassed, and the moment of bliss fades away because the toy can't function.

 When have you been disappointed by something not functioning as you thought it would? What was the reason for the item's inability to function?

As Christians, we believe salvation is a gift. God our Father has shown us grace in giving us salvation. But unlike those disappointing toy commercials, this gift doesn't need a disclaimer that says, "Batteries not included." The good news about God's gift is that alongside forgiveness of sins, we receive the Holy Spirit. He is the One who empowers us to live according to God's Word. The spiritual batteries of the Christian life are included because the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us (Rom. 8:9-13) and gives us strength to walk rightly before God and others.

In this session we listen in on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus taught this religious leader about the mystery of regeneration, what He described as being "born again." As Christians, we have been born again by the Spirit of God through faith in God's Son. The new birth is the basis of our confidence that God is at work transforming us and all who believe in the gospel.

Date of My Bible Study: _____

1. New birth begins with the Spirit and results in transformation (John 3:1-10).

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.”

As their conversation began, Nicodemus affirmed Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing. He recognized that Jesus had the blessing of God on His ministry, and so he complimented Jesus for the signs He had performed. That’s as far as Nicodemus went in attributing any special role to Jesus. It’s clear that he saw Jesus as a good teacher, a moral person, and perhaps even a model of how one should live.

Jesus’ response was abrupt. He didn’t acknowledge the compliments Nicodemus gave. He didn’t respond by offering compliments of His own or treating Nicodemus as a peer. Instead, Jesus said no one would see the kingdom of God without being born again. It’s impossible to see the salvation of God apart from this experience of being born from above—one can see “signs” but not their significance.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

70. 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.



What are some examples of people seeing God at work in the world (signs) but not attributing the work to God or understanding what the work means?



When have you seen God at work and misunderstood His plans?



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.”

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?

Nicodemus’ question was sincere. Because he did not understand what Jesus was teaching, he asked Him to clarify. Maybe he assumed that since he was a religious leader, he automatically had a right standing with God or already knew God’s plan for bringing His kingdom. Maybe he assumed that his religious observance gave him a better position from which to interpret and experience God’s mighty works.

Jesus did indeed clarify His initial statement. He revealed to Nicodemus that “new birth” is essential for entering into and experiencing the kingdom of God. One doesn’t come into this new relationship with God simply by being spiritual but by yielding to the Holy Spirit. Jesus connected the reality of being “born again” to the necessity of being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus didn’t need inside knowledge from Jesus; he needed new birth from the Spirit.



Voices from Church History

“Regeneration, as indeed the name shows, is a beginning of a second life. So before beginning the second, it is necessary to put an end to the first.”¹

—Basil (circa 329–379)



What was missing in the life of Nicodemus?



How does Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus provide a model for how we engage with those who are spiritually minded but not committed to Christ?

2. New birth comes through faith in God's Son (John 3:11-15).

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.

Here, Jesus has forced a dichotomy into the conversation between the religious leaders of Israel and Jesus with His disciples. The religious leaders so far had rejected the testimony of Jesus. This raised an important question: How could the religious leaders compliment Jesus for His teaching on any matter if they had rejected His testimony about Himself?

Jesus didn't wait for an answer. Instead, He claimed to be the One who had descended to earth from heaven. Jesus is the Son of God who took on human flesh in order to reveal the character of God to the world.



What is the connection between a person's identity and the value of their testimony?

Next, this conversation took a surprising turn. Jesus reminded Nicodemus of a story in the Old Testament found in Numbers 21:4-9. The Israelites were grumbling about their circumstances. God had brought them out of Egypt, but they failed to obey and take the promised land, so they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. During this time, God led them, God cared for them, and God provided water and food for them. But they decided they hated the food God gave them in the wilderness. They accused God of having malevolent intentions (“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”).

The Lord grew angry toward the Israelites and punished them by sending serpents into the camp. The plague of serpents was fierce, and the people began to repent. To save the people from the effects of their sin, God told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole. Anyone who looked at the snake—who gazed upon that symbol of evil—would be healed.

Jesus compared Himself (the Son of Man) to that snake! He was pointing forward to the moment when He would take upon Himself the weight of our sin, guilt, and shame. The cross would be the symbol of just how evil is our sin as well as the source of our salvation.

Only those who hear the gospel and look to Jesus alone as their sole means of salvation and believe in His teachings, perfect life, substitutionary death, and resurrection will be born again.



How would you explain the words “faith” and “believe” from a biblical perspective? What similar words would you use?



How does this passage illustrate the meaning of faith?

3. Jesus is the gift from the God who loves the world (John 3:16-21).

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. 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.”

The focus here is on how God loved the world, and the love described here is self-sacrificing. Romans 5:8 tells us that God demonstrated His love for us that even while we were still in sin, separated from Him, He sent His Son, Jesus, to seek and save the lost by dying for us. John 3:16 reminds us that God gave His best—Himself in the person of His Son—in the place of sinners like you and me.

It’s natural for us to value things that are unique. I remember one time when my wife and I were engaged, she created a Valentine card for me. She took time out of her busy schedule to get the materials necessary to make this card. This Valentine’s gift was unique, one-of-a-kind, and I still have it in my possession today. It’s kept safe because it is significant and meaningful to me.

The preciousness of Jesus and the beauty of the gospel go far beyond a card. The Valentine card signified the love of my wife for me, and that’s why it is special. But it’s the love—not just the card—that matters so much. The good news of God’s love for the world is not that He delivered a card that expresses His love, something we might bring out and admire every now and then. It’s that His love is the foundation of His Son’s sacrifice—and this is the love that undergirds our Christian life.



Voices from Church History

“Oh, what a gift of grace this is that is freely given to us by God! ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son’ (John 3:16). He is God’s unspeakable gift.”²

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)



What is the most significant gift you have ever received? What made it meaningful?

In John 3:17, we see that God sent His Son into the world not to judge it but rather to save it. Scripture is clear that there will come a day when Jesus will judge the non-believing world, and all who reject God's free gift of salvation through Christ will receive the consequences. But before judgment comes the extending of grace. Before judgment comes the appeal of God's Son to all humanity.

John wrote that those who reject Jesus already stand condemned before God. The good news is that Christ came to be executed in our place. When we trust in Jesus, we are accepting God's plea bargain, which expresses the truth that Jesus has already taken the execution sentence in our place. By grace through faith, we can be set free from the prison of sin and be given a new life in Christ because the sentence has been carried out.

Unfortunately, as this passage shows us, humans naturally love darkness (the sinful deeds and lifestyle we're born into) rather than the light of Jesus Christ. We live in a society where people entertain the false understanding that one can have Jesus *plus* their sin, to have Jesus as their light even while they pursue the deeds of darkness.



Voices from the Church

"Christianity is not something you *add* to your life; it *is* life!"³

—Henry Blackaby

But this passage shows us the reality of what life looks like for those who have embraced Jesus: "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" (John 3:21). Those who come to Jesus want His light to expose all of their life so that He can continue His work of renovating us from the inside out.

Imagine your heart as a spiritual home, and when you embrace God's gift of salvation through Jesus, He becomes the owner of the house, as God the Holy Spirit takes up residence inside of you. As the homeowner, He has the right to go through every room and make the renovations that He desires because He owns the home. Christ paid for it with His blood.

Sometimes I wonder if we feel more comfortable being a tour guide for Jesus walking through our home—as if we can keep certain rooms off-limits to Him. This passage of Scripture reminds us that Jesus is the light. He shines into every nook and cranny of our heart and brings about His transforming power.



In what areas of your life does it feel uncomfortable for the light of Christ to shine?



How does God's gift of salvation impact these areas of your life?

Conclusion

The work of regeneration is a supernatural work of God, not the natural work of man. Nevertheless, the responsibility of getting the message of the gospel out is the work God has called every believer to participate in. We should never assume that because people are familiar with religion, Christianity, or even the church that they know Jesus as their Savior. God has called every believer to trust in His power as we are transformed by the Holy Spirit.



Voices from the Church

“The Holy Spirit acts as the agent of regeneration, and the Word of God is the instrument He uses.”⁴

—Kenneth Keathley

CHRIST CONNECTION: Nicodemus was a religious man who was interested in Jesus' teaching. Jesus told him that he needed new life, not more religious activities. Jesus' teaching on the new birth reminds us that there is no spiritual life apart from Jesus. God loved the world in this way: He gave His Son so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to trust in His power to supernaturally transform us and those with whom we share the gospel.

1. What are some ways we can encourage one another to rely on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit as we share the gospel with others?

2. How would you respond to someone who says they consult Jesus as a good moral guide but not the Son of God?

3. Write a prayer asking God to do His supernatural work in your heart as His missionary and in the heart of an unbeliever you know who needs Jesus.
