

BIRTH TO REBIRTH

CORE PASSAGE: JOHN 3:5-8,14-21

CONTEXT

Early in Jesus's public ministry, large crowds followed Him. Yet their faith was inadequate. They were interested in Jesus—particularly in the miracles He performed—but not committed to Him. Because of their shallow faith, Jesus did not “entrust himself” to them (John 2:24). Jesus's conversation with a man named Nicodemus in John 3 explains what true, saving faith in Jesus truly entails.

KEY CONCEPT

Salvation requires being born again by the Holy Spirit and believing in Jesus Christ.

As you examine John 3:5-8,14-21:

- Note that being born again of the Spirit is necessary for entering the kingdom of God.
- Meditate on God's gift that believing Jesus died on the cross for our sins results in eternal life.



TIMELINE

John Baptizes Jesus
in the Jordan River
(Matthew 3:13-17)

Jesus Performs His First Miracle at
the Wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11)

SESSION STUDY:
Nicodemus Visits Jesus at Night
(John 3:1-21)

Jesus Calls Disciples to Follow Him
(John 1:35-51)

Jesus Cleanses the Temple
(John 2:13-22)

John the Baptist Scales Back
His Ministry (John 3:22-36)

Daily Readings

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: John 3:1-2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: John 3:14-17 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: John 3:3-8 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: John 3:18-21 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: John 3:9-13 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 18 |



Scan this QR code to access
this session's Scripture passages.

WE ARE BORN AGAIN THROUGH THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (JOHN 3:5-8).

Underline each mention of being born of the Spirit.

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.”

Jesus told Nicodemus, a Pharisee, that being born again is necessary for entering the kingdom of God (v. 3). That statement confused Nicodemus, so Jesus explained the requirement with different words: being “born of water and the Spirit” (v. 5). That phrase has drawn a range of interpretations, several of which may carry elements of truth. But the chief meaning of the phrase is grounded in the Old Testament.

The prophet Ezekiel foretold a day when God’s people would be cleansed from “all [their] impurities” by the “clean water” of God. That meant putting off old, sinful ways. God’s people also would be indwelt by God’s Spirit, who would cause them to follow the Lord (Ezek. 36:25-27). Being born of water and the Spirit means being freed from patterns of sin and set on the path of loving God. As being “born of the flesh” yields physical life, so being “born of the Spirit” should result in spiritual fruit.

LEADER NOTE: Being born of the Spirit is referenced in other parts of Scripture with different wordings. Paul called each believer “a new creation” in whom “the old has passed away” and “the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Elsewhere, Paul wrote that God “made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses” (Eph. 2:5). James and Peter, like John, referred to believers’ new spiritual life as a new birth (see Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3). Theologians refer to God’s imparting of new spiritual life as regeneration. It is entirely a work of God that humans cannot aid or merit.

What types of spiritual fruit should be visible if a person has been born again by the Holy Spirit?

Being born again is God's gracious work in each believer. We do not contribute to our new spiritual birth any more than we contributed to our physical birth. At the same time, humans are not entirely passive in the reception of salvation. Jesus emphasized this point by stating, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Humans are commanded to receive new spiritual life through the Holy Spirit's work. No one is exempt from this obligation to repent of sins and be transformed by the Spirit.

To explain the Spirit's transformation of humans, Jesus urged Nicodemus to consider the analogy of wind. We don't see its origin or when it stops, yet we are very much aware of its existence. Salvation is similar. Some facets of it are mysterious, yet new spiritual life for all who come to Jesus by faith is an unquestionable reality. The good news of Jesus is proclaimed, the wind of God's Spirit stirs human hearts, and they are transformed with new spiritual life.

LEADER NOTE: The comparison between wind and the Spirit would have had increased significance for the original readers of John's Gospel in Greek. The Greek word *pneuma* can be translated as "wind," "breath," and "spirit," suggesting a link between these concepts. Likewise in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the word *ruah* carries both meanings. Jesus may have been alluding to the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14, where God's breath entered dead bones and brought them to life, picturing the spiritual life God would impart to His people. As God breathed life into Adam physically (Gen. 2:7), the Holy Spirit of God breathes spiritual life into men and women who formerly were dead spiritually (Eph. 2:1).

How can you help others who don't understand what it means to receive new spiritual life?

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

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.

WE ARE GIVEN ETERNAL LIFE THROUGH BELIEVING IN JESUS CHRIST (JOHN 3:14-21).

Circle the results of believing in Jesus in the passage. Then underline the results of failing to believe in Jesus.

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. **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. **19** This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. **20** For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed. **21** But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.”

Here Jesus alluded to an episode in Israel’s wilderness wanderings in which the people grumbled against God and Moses. Consequently, God sent serpents to bite the Israelites, and many died. When the people confessed their sin and pleaded for mercy, God told Moses to raise up a bronze serpent on a pole. Any snake-bitten person who looked at the bronze serpent would live (Num. 21:4-9). Continued life was a merciful gift from God. Looking at the bronze serpent was the means to receive that merciful gift. Likewise, believing Jesus died on the cross for our sins is not a work that earns eternal life. It is the means of receiving eternal life.

Jesus’s mission to offer eternal life to sinners was the result of God’s love for the world. John 3:16 emphasizes both the way God demonstrated His love and the intensity of that love. “For God loved the world in this way,” He gave His Son to experience humiliation, torture, and death for the salvation of humanity.

LEADER NOTE: Christians have long discussed the relationship between regeneration (receiving new spiritual life) and faith. Does one precede the other? Scripture’s basic answer is clear: Regeneration and faith are two sides of the same coin. At the same moment a person places their faith in Jesus, the Spirit enlivens a person spiritually, and that person receives eternal life. Paul described both the divine and human roles in salvation when he wrote, “You are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift” (Eph. 2:8).

How would you explain what it means to believe in Jesus?

Notes

GOSPEL CONNECTION

x ————— x
Because of His love, God sent His Son, Jesus, to sacrifice His life for us so that we might be born again and have eternal life.

Despite God's love for the entire world, humanity is divided into two groups. Some believe in Jesus and are saved from condemnation. Their sins are applied to Jesus's account and regarded by the Father as punished on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). Other people are "already condemned" (John 3:18) by their sin and compound that condemnation by refusing to accept the only means of salvation offered by God—faith in His Son.

Those who hear the good news of salvation and reject Jesus ultimately are not rejecting Jesus for intellectual reasons. Rather, their deeds are evil; they simply enjoy their lifestyle apart from God. They flee from Jesus because they fear the exposure of their true character. In contrast, those who trust Jesus as Savior come to Jesus because they are grieved by their sin and know that only Jesus can help them. They are sinners saved by grace with lives that now bear godly fruit because of the Spirit's work in them.

LEADER NOTE: The Greek language of the New Testament had no quotation marks. Consequently, it is difficult to know at what point in John 3 Jesus stopped speaking and John began commenting on Jesus's words. Some Bible versions place the break after verse 15 while others place it after verse 21 and others in a different location. Our interpretation of the passage remains consistent regardless of where Jesus stopped speaking. "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). Therefore, everything written in John 3 is the perfect Word of God, whether it is a quotation of Jesus or the Spirit-inspired commentary of John on Jesus's words.

How should our view of the condemnation facing nonbelievers affect our willingness to share the gospel with others?

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As your group arrives, ask this ice-breaker question: “Salvation aside, can you think of something that you have had an epiphany about that completely changed what you thought you knew? It could be about a film, a book, restaurant, ball team, or a change in taste so that you now enjoy a food that you used to hate? What happened to make you change your mind?”

TRANSITION: It's entirely possible to have a change of heart or mind, but typically there is some type of catalyst to make it happen. In our story today, Nicodemus had noted Jesus's miracles and teaching and came to Him for answers about what he once thought he knew.

CONTEXT

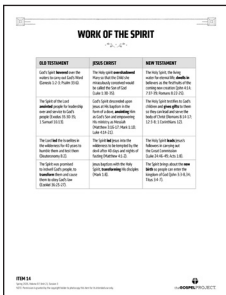
SAY: Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness to investigate His identity. Nicodemus readily acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher from God because, as he said, no one could do what Jesus did apart from God (v. 2), but his training made him skeptical, if not cynical. When Jesus proposed the idea of a necessary new birth, Nicodemus scoffed at the unimaginable picture of a grown person re-entering his mother's womb. So in response, Jesus offered an explanation on the meaning of spiritual rebirth.

RECAP

STATE: Jesus's description of spiritual regeneration as a wholly supernatural transformation challenged Nicodemus's understanding of how to be right with God. *(Pass out copies of Pack Item 14: Work of the Spirit and briefly review how the Holy Spirit works in our regeneration and in our lives as believers.)*

ASK: Jesus used several physical descriptors to try to help us understand what is a wholly spiritual process. Which ones stood out to you from the passage as you prepared this week?

RECITE: Point out that in His meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus spoke one of the most famous and familiar verses in Scripture: John 3:16. Invite the group to say it together, whether from memory or reading from their Personal Study Guide.



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Key Concept: Salvation requires being born again by the Holy Spirit and believing in Jesus Christ.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Draw attention to “The Nature of Spiritual Rebirth” chart on page 110 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG). Replicate the chart on a board.

	OLD NATURE	NEW NATURE
John 3:5-8		
Romans 6:5-8		
Romans 8:1-12		
Galatians 6:13-15		
Ephesians 4:22-27		

SAY: To receive a new nature, there must be a birthing point in each of our lives. It will not and cannot happen without the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts us of sin and calls us to repentance through belief in Jesus Christ.

DIRECT: Form five smaller groups and assign each group a Bible passage to read and discuss along the lines of “old nature” and “new nature”: John 3:5-8; Romans 6:5-8; Romans 8:1-12; Galatians 6:13-15; and Ephesians 4:22-27.

REGROUP: Direct each group to summarize briefly their Scripture passage. Instruct them to identify insights about our old sinful nature compared to our new nature that we receive from the Holy Spirit. Write down their findings on the chart and encourage groups to fill in their charts as needed, citing the Scripture passages.

CLARIFY: When we repent and place our faith in Jesus Christ, we are immediately justified—saved from our sin and made right with God. While we live on earth, however, we still struggle against our sin nature.

ENGAGE: Considering that spiritual rebirth is essentially a divine transformation, if you have received Christ, how would you describe that process to this group? What are some spiritual disciplines that can make the fight against our old sinful nature more successful?

HIGHLIGHT: Draw attention to John 3:17 and point out that while Jesus's purpose was not to consign people to death but to draw them to God and eternal life, it is true that not believing in Jesus leads to condemnation.

DEBRIEF

How does the fact that spiritual rebirth comes from God through the Spirit encourage you?

As faith is the human response for salvation, how would you define it, and why?

SUMMARIZE

Jesus challenged a religious leader with the notion that entering God's kingdom requires not a work of knowledge but a divine spiritual transformation. No doubt this upended Nicodemus's suppositions and caused him to look inward. We have evidence that Nicodemus may have taken that message to heart because after Jesus's death, he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea, who asked for Jesus's body. Nicodemus brought seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare His body for the tomb (John 19:39). This same challenge is for all to consider, both those who presume to be religious and those who aren't—to enter God's kingdom, we must be born again.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 111). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: We can learn various Bible stories through our church attendance without ever learning the Bible's central story: how to receive eternal life by believing in Jesus. Jesus chastised Nicodemus for lacking that very knowledge. Being born again, believing, and receiving eternal life are too important to leave unclear in your mind.

How would you explain what it means to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life to someone like Nicodemus?



HEART: The Bible commands us to examine ourselves for evidence of new spiritual life (2 Cor. 13:5). People who have been born again through the work of the Holy Spirit will exhibit "the fruit of the Spirit," such as love, joy, and peace, in increasing measure (Gal. 5:22-23). Followers of Jesus are not perfect, but they are becoming more like Him on their spiritual journey.

How does your life give evidence that you've been transformed by the Holy Spirit?



HANDS: The news about eternal life in Jesus is too important to keep to ourselves. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus how to be born again, God calls each believer to explain to others how they can experience new spiritual life. Consider how a phone call, lunch conversation, or coffee appointment might give you an opportunity to explain the gospel of Jesus.

With whom will you talk about a life-changing relationship with Jesus?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Spend time meditating on 1 John 4:7–5:13 to review the earmarks of spiritual rebirth and confirm that you are confident in your new (not perfect) nature.
- Understanding that we will always be a work in progress in this life, what are some needed spiritual developments in your life?
- Determine to share this week the message that Jesus communicated with someone who is struggling with a problem. Consider using John 3:16-17 as a starting point.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 111 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 18:31-36 with your group. Thank God for loving you and saving you from sin. Praise Him for our salvation and rebirth through the Holy Spirit.

