Summary and Goal

In 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.

Main Passage
John 3:1-21

Session Outline
1. New birth begins with the Spirit and results in transformation (John 3:1-10).
2. New birth comes through faith in God’s Son (John 3:11-15).
3. Jesus is the gift from the God who loves the world (John 3:16-21).

Theological Theme
Regeneration is God’s supernatural transformation of believers.

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.

Missional Application
God calls us to trust in His power to supernaturally transform us and those with whom we share the gospel.
Introduction

Share the writer’s example of the “batteries not included” disclaimer and how that can affect the way a toy functions (leader p. 106; PSG p. 83).

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?

Contrast the “batteries not included” disclaimer with God’s grace to us in salvation through forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. Then summarize this session on Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus (leader p. 106; PSG p. 83).

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

Read John 3:1-3. Call attention to how Jesus did not acknowledge Nicodemus’ compliments but instead pointed to the need to be born again to see God’s kingdom (leader p. 107; PSG p. 84).

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?


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).

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

Calling attention to this point on Pack Item 2: Hearing the Old Testament in the New, give the background for Jesus’ reference to the bronze snake (Num. 21:4-9)—a foreshadow of His coming sacrifice on the cross. Only by gazing at Him in faith can we be healed from our sin (leader pp. 109-110; PSG p. 87).

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).
Ask a volunteer to read John 3:16-21. Tell how the focus here is on God’s self-sacrificial love in sending His only Son to die for us so we can live for Him (leader pp. 111-112; PSG p. 88).

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

Speak to the coming judgment for those who reject Jesus, but first comes the extending of grace in Christ. Explain Jesus’ analogy of light and darkness in the lives of human beings, both Christian and non-Christian (leader pp. 112-113; PSG pp. 89-90).

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
Stress that regeneration is a supernatural work of God, and yet, God has called every believer to participate in the work of getting the gospel message out to people (leader p. 113; PSG p. 90). Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission” (PSG p. 91).

Point 2 Option
Prior to the group meeting, enlist a volunteer to read the story of the bronze snake (Num. 21:4-9) and be ready to share a summary of the Old Testament story and its significance here in the New Testament. You could also point your volunteer to our previous session on this story for some insights (“The Promised Land,” Session 2).

For Further Discussion
How does reading John 3:16 in its immediate context enhance the meaning of this verse for you?

Christ Connection:
Nicodemos 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.

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

Toy commercials are usually filled with action. They show kids having fun as they play with whatever product is being promoted. They highlight the gadget’s best features in a way that appeals to a child’s sense of imagination. 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. Unbearable disappointment in the eyes of a child! 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.

Session Summary

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

In John 3, the writer of this Gospel introduces an interesting man who came to see Jesus at night. He was a Pharisee, and his name was Nicodemus.

There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to him at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him.”

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

Nicodemus met with Jesus at night, perhaps so his meeting wouldn’t be noticed by other Pharisees or perhaps because this was the best time for this kind of conversation. Whatever his motivations, Nicodemus sought out Jesus and met with Him.

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. In other words, unless you are reborn and made new, you will not see God’s rule and reign. 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.

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?
Nicodemus didn’t understand what Jesus’ reply meant. So he followed up with a question.

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.”
9 “How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.
10 “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Jesus replied.

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.

Nicodemus isn’t all that different from many religious people today. It’s easy for people who have been raised in church or who have some sort of faith in God or who seek out spiritual experiences to believe that they have an inside track to God and His ways. As if spiritual interest is what gives us a right standing with God!

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.

As Lizette Beard writes:

Jesus pointed out the mysterious nature of this new birth by using the illustration of the wind. We cannot see the wind, but we do observe the impact it makes. In the same way, we do not understand all the workings of the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation. (Christians often disagree on the logical order of how it all takes place.) But we certainly see the effect of salvation when a person is brought from death to life, from darkness to light. 4
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).

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus continued, but now Jesus took the lead and began to explain further the “new birth” and its significance. This new and everlasting life comes through faith in Jesus.

Take a look:

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.

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 led us up from 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.

In Moses’ day, there was no cure apart from God’s instruction. The people could have tried their homemade remedies to save themselves from the bites of the serpents, but none of those remedies would have had any effect. There was only one way to be healed, and it was through gazing upon the bronze snake lifted high on the pole. In a similar way, Jesus explained, He too would be lifted up. The only way for people to receive eternal life—healing from the sickness of sin and pardon from the penalty of death—would be to gaze upon Him in faith.

Earlier in the Gospel, the apostle John made it clear that God is the sole supplier of salvation. John 1:12-13 says:

But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born, not of natural descent [biological descent], or of the will of the flesh [which is driven by sin from birth], or of the will of man [which is affected by sin], but of God.

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).

We’ve seen how Jesus instructed Nicodemus concerning eternal life and the need for new birth. Next, we come to one of the most famous verses in the Bible, one that sums up the good news of God’s love for the world. Take a moment to consider all that we have covered up to this point, and then read the verses after John 3:16 so you can see the verse in context.

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.”

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.

The preciousness of the gift of salvation is appreciated at a greater level of understanding when we recognize the unique nature of Jesus. Here, He is referred to as the one and only, the “only begotten,” which means He is unique, one-of-a-kind, and can never be replicated.

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. The card contained a picture of the two of us when we first started dating. It was framed inside of a white heart cut out of construction paper, pasted onto a red piece of construction paper. When I opened up, I read a personal message handwritten to me. 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.

Further Commentary

“The statement that God loves ‘the world’ is surprising on two counts (3:16). (1) Judaism rarely (or never) spoke of God’s loving the world outside of Israel. God desires to reach this world through Israel, his child. It is a uniquely Christian idea to say that God’s love extends beyond the limits of race and nation. (2) John tells his readers elsewhere that they are not to love the world (1 John 2:15-17) because it is a place of disbelief and hostility (cf. John 15:18-19; 16:8). Carson comments effectively, ‘There is no contradiction between this prohibition and the fact that God does love it [the world]. Christians are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation; God loves the world with the selfless, costly love of redemption.’ This helpful insight gives a clue to what John means by ‘the world.’ In John’s writings ‘world’ (Greek kosmos) is not a reference to the natural world of trees, animals, and plants... For John kosmos (used seventy-eight times in this Gospel, twenty-four times in his letters) is the realm of humanity arrayed in opposition to God (1:9; 7:7). Thus Jesus enters this world in his incarnation, knowing that hostility will result and that sacrifice will be needed in order to redeem the world (1:29; 3:17; 6:51). This dimension of the Son’s work must be underscored: The Son did not come to the world to save a select few (those chosen, those privileged); rather, he came to save the world, namely, the all-encompassing circle of men and women who inhabit this planet, people who embrace darkness habitually (3:19-21).”

–Gary M. Burge
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.

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. It’s similar to a criminal who has been arrested for murder, who pled not guilty, who went to trial and was found guilty, who received his sentence of the death penalty, and who is now on death row awaiting his execution. The time from the convicting and sentencing until the time that the execution takes place is similar to the state of non-believing humanity. We’ve been condemned by our sin; all we wait for now is for the death sentence to be carried out.

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.

But this passage shows us the reality of what life looks like for those who have embraced Jesus: “But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by 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.

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**Further Commentary**

“Jesus has not come to condemn the world (3:17) but to reveal and save, to provide a way of escape for those shuttered in the darkness. His coming does not bring a ‘verdict’ (NIV), but a process by which judgment is active on those who witness his coming. Those who see this light and recognize the tragedy of their own situation have one responsibility: to believe (3:16,18). Yet it is not so simple. The affections of people in the world are corrupt; their desires are fallen; they are not eager to be redeemed. They ‘love darkness instead of light’; in fact, they ‘hate’ the light. This is strong language, which uncovers something of the seriousness of the moral struggle between God and the world. Evil and darkness do not ignore the light; they wage war against it, trying to bring it down. But despite these efforts, the darkness cannot vanquish the light (1:19). The darkness launches a battle that brings about its own defeat. By contrast, those who love the coming of the light, who look on and trust the ‘upraised’ crucified Son, who believe in Jesus and ‘live by the truth’ (3:21), these people not only enjoy eternal life (3:16,18) but they come to the light and yearn for its truth...John is describing what happens when those in the world make a choice to believe; they are transformed into children of God (1:12; 11:52; 1 John 3:10), experiencing the power of the Spirit (3:5–6) and living the truth (3:21). Such people live righteously because God is at work in them (3:21b), not because they have a native desire to be godly.”

—Gary M. Burge
There’s something about having a clean house that motivates us to entertain company. When I was growing up, my mom would not allow people to come into our house if it was not clean. If there were times when family would drop by for a surprise visit, my mom would only allow them into certain rooms that were clean, which were most often the front room and the bathroom. People were not allowed to go into other rooms!

Often we treat Jesus this way. 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.

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.
Get expert insights on weekly studies through Ministry Grid at MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject. Grow with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog at LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry.

Study Material

- “The God Who Grants New Birth”—Chapter 8 from The God Who Is There by D. A. Carson
- “How to Be Born Again”—Article by Billy Graham; find a link to this article at GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources
- Previous Biblical Illustrator articles, including “Nicodemus: All We Know,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator. Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

Sermon Podcast

Colin S. Smith: “You Must Be Born Again”

Find a link to this at GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

Tip of the Week

How Do I Organize Care Groups? (Part 2)

- Contact members weekly. The contact may not be a visit, but some kind of contact should be made weekly to every member. Remember it is about building relationships.

- Make short but frequent contacts. The contacts don’t have to be long letters, visits, or phone calls. Shorter and more frequent visits are probably more productive than one long, infrequent visit.
Unit 1:

Michael Card has recorded over 37 albums, authored over 25 books, hosted a radio program, and written for a wide range of magazines. He has penned such favorites as “El Shaddai,” “Love Crucified Arose,” and “Emmanuel.” He has sold more than 4 million albums and written over 19 #1 hits, but the popularity of his work seems a stark contrast to his goal in life—to simply and quietly teach the Bible.

Unit 2:

D. A. Horton currently serves as a pastor at Reach Fellowship, a church plant in Los Angeles, California, and as the Chief Evangelist for UYWI. He is also working toward his PhD in Applied Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Elicia, have three children, Izabelle, Lola, and Damon Jr (aka Duce).

Special Session—Easter:

Richard R. Melick Jr. serves as a Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Affiliated Faculty, at Gateway Seminary. He is a consulting editor for The New American Commentary, for which he also contributed the volume Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. He and his wife, Shera, coauthored Teaching That Transforms. They have three children and eight grandchildren.