

UNIT 20

+

GOD'S LOVE

WAS REVEALED

AMONG US

IN THIS WAY

“You Must Be Born Again”

by Chris Poblete

A group of short-term missionaries traveled to an impoverished nation where they were greeted by a pastor at a church building in the middle of the region. The church’s property appeared worn down with cracks in the tiled walls and what looked like a thick layer of red dirt covering the entire floor. Making plans to serve the village, one missionary suggested they “spruce up” the church building by scrubbing the floors with soap and warm water.

The pastor laughed and informed the well-meaning volunteer that the floor was made of red clay, patted down and dried in the heat, and that there were no tiles beneath the clay to match the walls. If soap and water were used, it would just turn into mud, and the more you added, the muddier it would get. Embarrassed by his mistake, the missionary then recommended they replace the floor altogether, which the team eventually did for the grateful pastor.

WE NEED TO BE BORN AGAIN

What the church building needed was an entirely new floor made of something other than dried up mud. The same is true of the human heart—it comes dried up, hard, and dirty, and no amount of scrubbing can help it or prepare it for worship. While it’s technically true that church buildings don’t need clean floors for Sunday worship, it is true that human beings need a new heart. The only way we receive a new heart is by being made new, or born again.

This “new birth” the Bible speaks of is necessary because we are all sinners by nature and choice. Some of the first words that come out of a child’s mouth after “mama” and “dada” are “no” and “mine.” From our earliest years of development, the human heart is bent toward defiance and self-centeredness.

Elaborating on this grim reality, the apostle Paul described us as “dead” in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). The metaphor

Without God, we are cosmic rebels without a cause.

of “deadness” is appropriate when you consider the parallels between being “spiritually dead” in our sins and being “physically dead” in our bodies. For example, a physically dead person cannot feel his surroundings. He has no eyes to see and no ears to hear. He has no senses to perceive the world around him. In the same way, part of what it means to be spiritually dead is to be blind and deaf to spiritual things. It is to be unresponsive to the truth, goodness, and beauty of God and to find other things as more interesting—be it a person, a place, a cause, a concern, or some other idol of the heart.

Jesus spelled out our helplessness when He said that we love the darkness and hate the light (John 3:19). Without God, we are cosmic rebels without a cause. Before God’s holy face, even our best deeds are incomplete, come with wrong motives, and fall short of His glory.

WE CANNOT FIX OURSELVES

There’s a scene in C. S. Lewis’s *The Voyage of the Dawntrader* in which a young boy named Eustace suddenly finds himself in the awesome-yet-unwanted form of a dragon. Eustace finds himself very frustrated. He cannot talk. He cannot play with his cousins. He’s lonely and miserable. Wishing to be a boy again, he tries to shed off his dragon skin, but with each skin that sheds, another dragon hide is revealed underneath. It is only when he allows Aslan, the Christlike lion of Narnia, to claw into his dragon scales and peel them off that the formidable dragon skin is finally shed.

Similarly, we find ourselves trying to fix the brokenness sin brings to our hearts by turning to anything other than Jesus. We move from one functional savior to the next, and it never seems to work or satisfy. The good news for us is that in Jesus, God has come to make us new. He has come to make us born again. He has come to awaken us to the way of joy, the truth of His Word, and the life we have always longed for.

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Once the Spirit “re-births” us to a new life in Christ, everything changes.

GOD’S LOVE MAKES US BORN AGAIN

This metaphor of being “born again” might seem perplexing at first, as it certainly was for Nicodemus, but once again we find the biblical metaphor helpful when we consider its implications. How do you know that you were physically born? The answer should be obvious: You’re here! You’re alive! You wouldn’t be here reading this paragraph if you were never born. You wouldn’t appeal to your birth certificate to prove you were born. You would appeal to the fact that you are here, living and breathing and existing. Similarly, the way you know you are spiritually born again is you become alive to the things of God. You once were a slave to your sins, but now you are free to walk in newness of life! It’s not that you no longer sin but that when you do sin, you hate it and it seems unnatural. You once were blind, but now you see.

And once the Spirit “re-births” us to a new life in Christ, everything changes. We begin to seek true satisfaction in Christ alone. We begin to realize that He supplies the living water we’ve thirsted for all our life. None of us deserve this. But Jesus lived and died for undeserving

sinners like you and me because He is the very embodiment of God’s amazing love. The good news of God’s love for us is not like Jesus throwing you a life raft in the sea of eternity and you having to reach out and grab it. Instead, you are dead on the bottom of the sea and needing to be quickened to new life. God sent His Son into the world to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins so that our hardened and dirty hearts might be made new and that we might now have new life through Him.



THE SON BRINGS ETERNAL LIFE

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

Jesus came to earth so that those who believe in Him would escape condemnation and have eternal life.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

John 3

+ **SETTING:**

John began his Gospel helping his readers understand that Jesus is God and pre-existed at creation and was active in creation. He continued with John the Baptist and his pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God. He then moved to the beginning of Jesus's ministry as He gathered disciples. In chapter 2, Jesus turned water into wine and began to show people how He is able to transform things in His power for His glory. His zeal for the Lord is unmatched. Chapter 3, then, begins with one of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, approaching Jesus at night. Nicodemus wanted to talk with Jesus about the signs Jesus was doing.

DAY 1

READ:

John 3:1-8

FOCAL PASSAGE:

John 3:1-3

NOTES

In John 3, Nicodemus approached Jesus. Nicodemus was “a man from the Pharisees” and “a ruler of the Jews.” These descriptions meant that he would have been someone who was looked up to in the community. He would have been known for his strict following of the law and would have been well respected in the community. He would have been someone the people looked at and admired. He would have been known as a person everyone would have thought to be in the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus, when approaching Jesus, acknowledged that Jesus is from God and that God was with Him. He hadn’t even asked a question yet, but Jesus knew what He needed to hear. Jesus bluntly told him that unless he was “born again,” he could not see the kingdom of God. Despite Nicodemus’s moral character and adherence to the law and respected authority in the community, Jesus essentially told him that he still wasn’t a citizen of heaven.

Imagine hearing the words “born again” for the first time ever. What does that even mean? Would I have to die and come back? Would I have to go back in the womb and be re-birthed? And if so, why? Have I not followed every rule, dotted every “i,” crossed every “t”?

The gospel confronts us in our own sinful trust of our self-righteousness. We need to guard ourselves from the false way of thinking that our own morality will save us. There are many who think they will be saved because they are seen as “good people.” However, one’s identity as a “good person” is not what saves.

As Jesus taught here, one must be born again. Spiritually dead people cannot bring themselves to life. They need to have the life that comes from believing in Jesus Christ, that He is God, and His life, death, and resurrection is the only thing that saves us.

How might you be trusting in your own morality for salvation?

DAY 2

READ:

John 3:1-8

FOCAL PASSAGE:

John 3:3-4

NOTES



KEY DOCTRINE #69:

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.

When Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," Nicodemus was confused and asked, "How can a man be born when he is old?" He responded just like many of us would respond if we were talking to Jesus here. Yet Jesus was not speaking of a physical birth but a spiritual birth. Jesus used a human baby's birth as an illustration for the spiritual reality of new birth that needs to take place for someone to enter the kingdom of God.

Theologians have called this concept of being born again "regeneration," which "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)" (see sidebar).

The only way for any of us to have eternal life and enter the kingdom of God is through the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit bringing life where there was only death. Think about how incredible the miracle of regeneration is! God did not have to save any of us. However, in His mercy, grace, and love, God sent Jesus to save us from our sins! Understanding the nature of conversion should strip us of all our pride. There is nothing we can contribute to our own salvation, aside from repentance and faith, the resignation of any strength or worth we think we have on our own. We do not bring about this birth on our own, but God in His grace brings life to us.

The gospel is meant to humble us because we cannot save ourselves from our sins. Additionally, the gospel is meant to bring us confidence because the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in saving us is fully and finally accomplished.

How can you live a life of humble confidence while trusting in God's grace?

DAY 3

READ:

Ezekiel 36:24-30;
John 3:5-13

FOCAL PASSAGE:

John 3:5

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The answer to Nicodemus' question, 'How can a man be born when he is old?' is: Only when he is willing to die to everything in his life, including his rights, his virtues, and his religion, and becomes willing to receive into himself a new life that he has never before experienced."¹

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)

Jesus told Nicodemus that unless someone is “born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

There are all sorts of interpretations of what Jesus meant here. However, Jesus likely was alluding to Ezekiel 36. Jesus was using two metaphors (water and Spirit) from the Old Testament to teach about what being born again means. The metaphor of water in the Old Testament usually refers to a cleansing or renewal process. And the reference to the Spirit’s work reminds us of God’s sovereignty and control. He is the One working. He is the One washing and changing our hearts and giving us new life.

In Ezekiel 36:25-27, we see that both water and Spirit are used. These images in Ezekiel are used to signify a cleansing from impurity and the transformation of the heart. This cleansing and transformation will take place in order to help us follow God faithfully. Every single one of us needs to be cleansed from our sin. God is holy; therefore, our sin has separated us from His presence. We must be cleansed and filled with His Spirit. This comes about by the work of the Lord through the Holy Spirit in bringing us to saving faith.

Jesus was teaching Nicodemus that the process of washing and renewal has arrived. The only way for Nicodemus to be washed and brought to new life was to trust in Christ. The only way any of us can get into the kingdom of God is through faith in Jesus Christ.

If you have been washed and cleansed of your sins through faith in Jesus Christ, how will this change cause you to live a grateful life for what God has done for you?

DAY 4

READ:

Numbers 21:4-9;

John 3:14-15

FOCAL PASSAGE:

John 3:14-15

NOTES

Are you prone to grumble? Every day we are given numerous opportunities to grumble and complain. At the heart of our desire to grumble and complain is forgetfulness. When we grumble and complain, we fail to remember what God has done for us.

In Numbers 21, the people of Israel began to grumble and complain against God and Moses. They had forgotten all that God had done for them. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and provided for their daily needs in the wilderness for forty years! Due to their grumbling and complaining, God sent a plague of poisonous snakes upon them. Moses, then, went to the Lord to intercede on behalf of the people. God told him to make a snake image and put it on a pole, and when anyone who was bitten looked at it, they would be healed (Numbers 21:8). Thankfully, the people repented and the Lord provided a way of deliverance for them.

Jesus used the example of Moses lifting up a serpent for the people's deliverance to explain to Nicodemus how all who look to Christ will have eternal life. God graciously gave the people in the wilderness a way to be delivered. In a small way, that deliverance pictured how Christ would be lifted up, and all who look to Him in faith for salvation and eternal life will also be delivered.

When we grumble, we are actually sinning against God. We are saying that what God has given us is not good enough. When things don't go our way, we can either turn to grumbling or we can turn to remembrance—remembering what God has done for us in Christ. People will not be drawn to Christ in you if you are known for grumbling. Christians should seek to be those who have joy in any circumstance because they have not forgotten what God has done for them.

How are you tempted to forget what God has done for you and complain?

DAY 5

READ:

John 3:16-21

FOCAL PASSAGE:

John 3:16

NOTES

Are you amazed by God's love?

There are times when we no longer are amazed by the fact that God loves us. Yet it is truly incredible that He does. Think about how incredible this passage of Scripture is: "For God so loved . . ." Why would God love us? What have we done to deserve God's love? The answer is that we have done nothing to deserve the love of God! It is truly incredible to think that God does not simply "put up with us" but that He actually loves us.

How do we know that God loves us? The ultimate demonstration that God loves us and is for us comes from knowing that He sent His one and only Son so that everyone who believes in Him would have eternal life. The Lord would have been just and right to leave us in our sin, destined for eternity in hell. But praise be to God that He did not. God did not just save us from punishment for our sins—no, He also gives us eternal life! The wonderful gift of salvation means that God loves us and brings us into His own family.

God's love is never meant to be an excuse to sin though. There are some who wrongly misuse John 3:16 to justify their sinful lifestyle. The grace and love of God should never be used as a license to sin. The apostle Paul wrote that even though we have grace, that doesn't mean we should continue in sin (Romans 6:1-2). The love of God should change us and motivate us to live faithful and God-glorifying lives.

How has God's love transformed you? How is God's love transforming you still?

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“And indeed from the Spirit comes our New Birth, and from the New Birth our new creation, and from the new creation our deeper knowledge of the dignity of Him from Whom it is derived.”²

—Gregory of Nazianzen
(c. 329-390)

POINT 1: The Son came so that people might experience new birth (John 3:1-8).

KEY DOCTRINE #69: REGENERATION

Regeneration takes place at the _____ 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 _____ (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 _____ to produce.



How should a biblical understanding of regeneration inform our evangelism?

Both the Old and the New Testament speak of the need to be made _____ in the power of God’s Spirit through a spiritual _____ of sin.

POINT 2: The Son came so that people might have eternal life (John 3:9-16).

Jesus used an Old Testament story to teach that _____ those who look to _____ in _____ will be saved from their sins and given eternal life.

God’s _____ is seen in that He did not leave the world in its sin but sent His only _____ so that all who believe in Him would not _____ but live eternally.



What is the present reality and future expectation for one who doesn’t believe in Jesus?

POINT 3: The Son came so that people might escape condemnation (John 3:17-21).

Our sin _____ us, but God sent His Son, Jesus, to _____ us and those in the world who would believe.

? Why should we not brush aside sins, even “small” ones?

Though human beings tend to run to the darkness, when we live by God’s truth, trusting in _____, we show that we are in the light because of God’s _____ in us.

? Why is sin so tempting and desirable at times?

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been born again and have new life in Christ, we live with eternity in view as we prioritize calling others to be born again.

- **HEAD:** How have you heard about God’s love in Christ? Experienced God’s love? Come to believe in Jesus as the saving gift of God’s love?
- **HEART:** What sins are tempting you this week that you will ask God to strengthen you to overcome?
- **HANDS:** How does knowing that everyone who does not believe in Jesus is already condemned (John 3:18) motivate you to be courageous in your witness to the gospel?



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

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Our Redeemer and Maker, who was Son of God before the ages, became Son of man at the end of ages. Thus the one who, through the power of his divinity, had created us to enjoy the happiness of everlasting life, might himself restore us, through the weakness of our humanity, to recover the life we had lost.”³

—Bede (c. 673-735)