



Disciplers Bible Studies

JOHN
LESSON 4

The New Birth and New Master John 3:1-36

Introduction

In Lesson 3, Chapter 2, we saw our Lord start His public ministry at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. His divine miracle of creating wine from water was a fitting symbol and reality of His power as the Word who became flesh. He came to fulfill and terminate the old order of Judaism and to replace it with a new worship in Spirit and in truth.

The inference of this new wine miracle is that Christ produced a new creation showing that He alone has the power to give men new birth and new life. Jesus manifested His glory with this sign. His disciples and the servants saw it all and knew what happened. John wrote, *"His disciples believed in Him."*

Also in Chapter 2, we saw Christ's righteous anger in cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem during Passover. The Jews questioned His authority. His perplexing answer, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* was beyond them. His disciples grasped part of the picture, but then remembered after His resurrection that He had said this. His statement was giving them a sign of His own death, His resurrection, and the founding of the church. This was a clear demonstration of His divine authority.

John tells us that, because of His signs, many believed in His name, but Jesus was not entrusting Himself to them. He could read their hearts and saw that their faith and allegiance were marginal. He would not admit them into the inner depths of His person and purposes because they were not sincere and child-like in their faith. Neither were they genuinely conscious of their sinfulness and their need for forgiveness; they were not convicted that Christ alone was the Mediator of forgiveness.

In this lesson we shall see the most crucial tenet of the Christian faith - how you receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and thereby become a child of God.

Outline of John 3:1-36

- I. The New Birth (3:1-21)
- II. The New Master (3:22-36)

I. The New Birth

A. The Way

1. Setting

The scene was Jerusalem. Jesus was having a heart-to-heart conversation with a man of highest moral reputation, a prominent Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. He was a ruler of Pharisaic Judaism, a hyper-legalistic and self-oriented belief system. The Pharisees had it right on some spiritual issues, such as the decree of God, man's moral responsibility, immortality, resurrection of the body, the existence of spirits and rewards and punishments. But, their spiritual downfall derived from a self-centered, righteous attitude combined with the prideful practice of externalized religion. Their form of godliness required strict obedience to man-made laws derived in part from Mosaic law. They exercised a lot of political power, but they were not a political party.

2. The Searching Pharisee

Nicodemus came to Jesus after dark, perhaps to keep his visit private and uninterrupted. The Pharisees were generally antagonistic toward Jesus and so Nicodemus probably wanted to avoid conflict with his religious associates. Nicodemus was not only in physical darkness when he came to Jesus, he was in spiritual and intellectual darkness as well.

Nicodemus opened the conversation with a complimentary statement about Jesus coming from God as a teacher. His expectation was for Jesus to recognize him as a ruler of the Jews and to give him affirming information with respect to the Kingdom of God. His hope was that Jesus would simply explain to him the worthy way he was already walking and maybe give him one more instruction he could add to his knowledge, his moral stature and his enviable position in the Jewish culture.

3. The Divine Answer

Without hesitation, Jesus cut all ground of self-righteousness from under Nicodemus' feet. His reply showed Nicodemus that he was not even close to the way. In his present condition, he could not even see the Kingdom of God, let alone enter it.

Jesus' straight forward statement, "*Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.*" told him that no one can experience the reign of God, no matter what his race or his degree of piety, apart from the experience of new birth. To enter the Kingdom of God means to obtain eternal life. John MacArthur paraphrased it this way in a sermon on John, "Nicodemus, you are a respected and conscientious member of Israel and the Sanhedrin, but you cannot enter the Kingdom unless you are born again. To be born again involves the abandonment of every attempt to become righteous by anything a man can do for himself and to be willing to receive ungrudgingly the free gift of grace that God offers. Such a complete reorientation is an experience that can be likened to physical birth. It is an emergence from darkness into light."

B The Divine Means (3:4-8)

1. The Perplexed Pharisee

Nicodemus, with his strong background in theology and Old Testament Scriptures, failed to see that it was a supernatural birth that Jesus was talking about. At this stage, he lacked spiritual insight and did not understand that God's creative power included the spiritual realm as well as the material and physical world.

2. Jesus' Explanation

Jesus explained to him that a person must be born of water and born of the Spirit to enter into the Kingdom of God. These are not two separate things that take place before regeneration. They are a part of the same action that the Spirit takes based on a person's sincere surrender and genuine confession of sin and need. The Old Testament (with which Nicodemus was familiar) often speaks of water symbolically representing spiritual cleansing and renewal (Numbers 19:17-19; Ezekiel 36:25-26), and speaks of the Spirit as representing God's life (Genesis 1:2; Job 34:14). Therefore, born of water does not mean one's natural birth or water baptism, because that would contradict other Scriptures. "Jesus evidently meant that unless a person has experienced spiritual cleansing and renewal from the Spirit, he or she couldn't enter the Kingdom. Jesus used the phrase "born

from above" to mean the same as "born again" (Dr. Constable's Notes on John). The important point is that it is the Spirit of God which acts upon a repentant and receptive heart.

C. The Deliverer: The Son of God (3:9-21)

1. The Flesh and the Spirit

Jesus explained "*born again*" further by distinguishing between flesh and spirit. "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*" (vs. 6).

Flesh meant the physical body with its fallen nature, the way we are all born the first time. That which was born of the Spirit indicated the new creature that is born of God (or born from above) by receiving Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. When this happens, a person has a reorientation in his heart. There has been an impartation of eternal life through the empowering of the Spirit of God. A change occurs in his heart and the result is a new creature - with a new relationship with God and a new orientation in his life. He is born again (2 Corinthians 5:17).

2. Bewildered Nicodemus

Nicodemus was probably looking on in bewilderment. Jesus explained to him that the new birth in the Spirit was mysterious. He likened it to the non-understandability of the wind. You can't see it, but its effects are undeniably there. That's the way it is with the Holy Spirit of God.

When Nicodemus asked, "*How can these things be?*", Jesus gently rebuked him with words that said in effect, "*Nicodemus, you as a distinguished master of Israel ought not be ignorant of the power of God to change human lives. Your study of Scripture should have taught you that God not only can give men a new heart, but He has promised to do so*" (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

3. Jesus' Divine Authority

Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus that He was more than a teacher come from God. He had divine authority and He alone had come down from heaven to declare heavenly things. Nicodemus was an intelligent man, but these words from this man must have been incredibly puzzling. Either Jesus was out of His mind, or He really was the Son of God.

4. Old Testament Analogy

Then Jesus led him into an amazing Old Testament revelation concerning the redemptive work of the Cross (Numbers 21:6-9). In vs. 14-15 of John, He referred to God plaguing Israel with poisonous snakes for their rebellious actions. The snakes became very bad and the Israelites prayed for deliverance. God commanded them to make a serpent of brass which was a symbol of the sting of sin, death and punishment. They nailed it on a high pole and Moses lifted it. Anyone who gazed with faith on the brass serpent would be healed of the poisonous snake bites and live. In a like manner, the Son of Man would be identified with our sin, death and punishment and would be lifted so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.

5. Vs. 16, the Best Known Scripture

Some scholars believe vs. 15 ended the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Most, however, believe Jesus' words continue on through vs. 21.

This section of the text (vs. 16-21) is considered to be the heart of John's record of Jesus' early ministry. The lead-in verse says it all: *"For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* Dr. T Constable writes, "Verse 16 is the best known verse in the whole Bible. It expresses the gospel message more clearly and winsomely than any other." God's infinite, limitless love was sent to a world of sinful men and women without distinction or exception. He gave us His best, His unique and His beloved Son.

God's concern for the misery of mankind was proved at the Cross. He gave His only Son to prove His love was for sinners - for you and me. The only response required from us is faith, with the result that we are delivered from perishing, the second death that leads to eternal separation from God.

"The consequences of belief and faith are new birth (vs. 3,5), eternal life (vs. 15,16), and salvation (vs. 17). The alternative, unbelief, is perishing (vs. 16, 10:28), losing one's life (12:25), and destruction (17:12). To perish means ruin, failure to realize God's purpose, and exclusion from His fellowship. The only two alternatives to our existence are life and perishing; there is no other final state" (Dr. T. Constable).

6. The Idea of Hell

Many people do not accept the idea of hell very readily. How sadly wrong that is! Jesus Himself warns

people more about the reality of hell than He talks about heaven. In vs. 18-21, we are told that not to believe is to live and die under the condemnation of God.

John tells us in vs. 17-18 that God's purpose in sending His Son was not to judge or condemn mankind, but rather to provide salvation for everyone of faith through His death on the cross. The person who believes in Jesus Christ escapes condemnation. However, the one who does not believe in Jesus stands condemned already with no way of escape.

7. Light and Darkness

Light and darkness are the main subjects of vs. 19-21. Jesus as the Light of the world brought the light of the gospel from the Father. But wrong-doers love darkness and hate the light. They avoid the light that Jesus brought because it exposes the self-orientation and vanity of their lives. Harris writes in *A Theology of John's Writings*, "Verses 19-21 is one of the most important passages in the Gospel of John for understanding the light-darkness polarization in Johannine theology, and also for understanding John's gospel itself."

II. The New Master (3:22-36)

A. The Concurrent Ministries of Jesus and John (3:22-24)

The next passage we come to is about the parallel ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. After the interview with Nicodemus, Jesus went out into the land of Judea with His disciples and they were baptizing. John the Baptist was also baptizing in another area and there was a complaint from the Baptist's disciples that Jesus was baptizing more people than John. There may have been a little envy and bitterness because of sympathy for their master.

1. The Place of John (3:25-30)

John did not succumb to the temptation to be envious and bitter toward Jesus. He was a true man of God and he clarified his followers' concerns by telling them that God called him to a secondary role of announcing and preparing the way. He was obediently contented with this role. He pointed out that he expected them to leave him and follow Jesus. This was the plan from the beginning. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was everything, and he, John, was simply God's herald to point others to Him. He readily confessed Jesus' superiority to him in every way and told his followers, *"Therefore this*

joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Application.

The true moral state of your heart and mind is declared by the attitude you take toward Christ and toward the Bible that reveals Him. Every truly sincere person who wants to be well-pleasing to God and grow in holiness comes to the Light when it is made available to Him. Are you like John the Baptist, pointing people towards Christ in your actions, your thoughts and your words?

2. The Place of Jesus (3:31-36)

The closing verses of Chapter 3 explain the preeminence of Jesus and why He must become greater. The Incarnate Word came down from heaven and bore witness to what He had seen and heard in the heavenly sphere.

Jesus' origin was *“from above”*, and the new birth (born again) can come only by faith in Him who is from above. His place of origin and witness illustrated His superiority over all people that are bound to the earth.

Jesus' witness is God's perfect truth. He is God's perfect messenger and He delivers God's message perfectly. Those who accept God's witness therefore attest to the truthfulness of God. They see Christ as the perfect object of His heavenly Father's love. Everything that is to be revealed about God has been committed to Him.

Concerning vs. 35, Dr. Constable writes, “God not only gave Jesus His Spirit without measure, but He placed everything in His hands. The Father has been gracious to the Son because He loves Him even as He has been gracious to human beings in providing salvation because He loves us. Everything that the Father has done, revelation and redemption, flows from His love of people through the Son. This statement also points out the dependence of the human Jesus on the Father, one of John's major themes.”

In this passage, John explained that Jesus came from heaven with greater authority than any previous prophet. He fully represented God and, from His own observations in heaven, revealed God's words accurately and completely. The Father fully endowed Him with divine authority and assistance to be the object of peoples' faith. He was superior to John the Baptist as well as every other divine representative.

The passage ends with the statement that belief or disbelief in the Son of God is a matter of life and death. To the believer, Christ's coming is the supreme revelation of God's love bringing the assurance of eternal life. To the unbeliever, Christ's coming is the sign that he remains the object of God's displeasure.

Application

Our culture is dominated by role-playing and pretension. Many people are insecure and non-transparent. They hide their inner selves from others. It is a staggering Biblical truth, however, that we cannot hide our real selves from Jesus; His penetrating, all-knowing mind goes to the core of our being and He knows everything about each one of us. As our omniscient God, He knows us better than we know ourselves. He understands our human nature fully and His penetrating insight sees the hidden closets of our hearts and minds. Do you honestly believe that God not only listens to what we say, but that He knows our inward thoughts, attitudes and intentions?