

Teaching Points

In a previous session we noted how John's gospel includes 7 prominent miracles that are arranged around teaching moments in Christ's ministry. Alongside the miraculous signs that Jesus performed John also records several conversations that Jesus had with various individuals. Chapter 3 is comprised of one of these conversations that took place between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Who was Nicodemus? Verse 1 tells us that he was a Pharisee. This put him in an elite group of religious leaders who held significant power and influence in Jesus' day. Verse 10 describes him as a teacher of Israel. The Pharisees were known for their rigid observance of the law of Moses as well as many man-made religious traditions. Nicodemus was an educated man who was steeped in religious tradition.

Notice how Nicodemus' introduction flows seamlessly out of the end of chapter 2. In chapter 2, we read that many believed in Jesus but He didn't commit Himself to any man. Verse 25 says, "...**[He] had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.**" Immediately after this statement we read in 3:1 that A MAN of the Pharisees came to Jesus to talk at night. The entire conversation that follows is an illustration what 2:23-25 says. Nicodemus greets Jesus with words of affirmation, but Jesus quickly shows this man that he himself has much to learn. Jesus doesn't need affirmation from Nicodemus; rather, Nicodemus needs instruction from Jesus.

Much can be said about the conversation that takes place between Jesus and Nicodemus. We've chosen to break it down into two broad categories.

1. You must be born again.

The central talking point in the first part of the conversation is the concept of a man being "born again."

Discussion Question: What does it mean to be born-again? Why does Jesus use this kind of imagery to make His point?

Thoughts: *The phrase "born again" is a description of God's saving work. It's a spiritual rebirth. God takes those who are dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-3) and makes them alive through the power of Christ. Humans are blind, deaf, and dead in relation to God. But God heals this condition by giving life to the sinner's dead heart. When this occurs, a person is born again.*

The imagery here is closely connected to passages like Ezekiel 36:25-27. Notice the overlapping themes of water and spirit. Ezekiel prophesies about the cleansing, washing, renewing, work of God's Spirit. He remakes our hearts; turning them from stone to flesh. The end result is a new life - one in which the sinner now knows, loves, and serves God from the heart.

This conversation is about **regeneration (re = again, generate = to beget)**. Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus both the necessity and the nature of spiritual rebirth.

Regeneration is the necessary front door to all the blessings and benefits described in John's gospel. In order for a sinner to know God, to live forever, and to enjoy life more abundantly in Christ, he must FIRST be born again. This is why Jesus says in verse 3, **"...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."**

Regeneration is also something supernatural. No human effort can cause this experience. Jesus makes this clear in verse 8 when He describes the Spirit's work like the wind blowing. We cannot control this invisible work of God - but when God accomplishes the work you can see the effects of a changed heart.

2. Belief in the crucified Savior.

The second half of this conversation focuses on the importance of belief. This isn't merely belief in anything we think is worthy. Jesus is pointing to His own work on the cross as the proper object of faith. Faith itself is not what saves us - but the object of our faith is what makes all the difference.

In verse 14 Jesus uses an Old Testament story about healing and deliverance to illustrate the nature of His work on the cross (Numbers 21:9). Christ is going to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sinners by being lifted up in crucifixion. Whoever looks to this crucified Savior will be saved.

The belief that's described in this part of the conversation is the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the born-again experience mentioned in the first section is being elaborated on in the rest of the conversation. If we were to ask, "What does it look like when a person is born again?" The answer would be, "It looks like a person who believes in the person and work of Jesus." Born again people are **believers**.

Discussion Question: If belief in Christ comes about as a work of the Holy Spirit, then why do we bother evangelizing? Shouldn't we just wait for the Spirit to change someone's heart whenever He's ready?

Thoughts: *We evangelize because God told us to! We preach the word and share Christ with those around us - but only God can transform a heart. The word of God contains life giving power in itself. When we share the word with others we are exposing them to the very source of life and light that God says has the power to convert the soul. We cannot control the results, but we can always trust God to use His word to accomplish His wise and good purposes.*

Prayer Focus

This picture of salvation in John 3 leaves no room for boasting. We didn't cause ourselves to be born again any more than we caused ourselves to be naturally born! Spend time thanking God for such mercy that saved sinners like us.

Let's pray that we would walk in the Spirit and honor Him always. We don't serve Him to get saved - we serve Him because He's saved us.

Spend time praising the triune God of our salvation. The Father loved us so much that He sent His Son. Christ willingly came to lay down His life on our behalf. The Spirit regenerates our hearts and causes us to see and believe these amazing truths.
Hallelujah!