

# 08

## SESSION EIGHT

# Nicodemus and the New Birth

### SESSION SUMMARY

This session depicts a conversation in which Jesus taught a religious leader, Nicodemus, about the mystery of regeneration—what He described as “being born again.” Christians 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.

### SCRIPTURE

John 3:1-21

# THE POINT

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**Regeneration is God's supernatural transformation of believers.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

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."

Most likely, there were 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 are 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 and gives us strength to walk rightly before God and others (Rom. 8:9-13).

### Option 2

The storyline of *Transformers* follows the Autobots (the "good" robots)—who transform into cars, trucks, helicopters, and other machines—as they try to keep the world safe from the Decepticons (the "bad" robots, who also transform into different machines as needed). These robotic characters are featured in books, TV shows, movies, and comics, and they are frequently introduced as, "*Transformers: More than Meets the Eye.*"<sup>1</sup>

- **What comes to mind when you hear the word *Transformers*? What do you know about the movies, TV shows, books, or comics?**

As with the Transformers, there's "more than meets the eye" with our spiritual transformation. Though we do not physically transform when we're "born again" into God's family, our hearts and lives are transformed as a result of His grace and love for us. This new birth is a spiritual renewal that occurs on the inside and displays itself in our words and actions.

- **In what ways has your life changed since you trusted Jesus as your Savior?**

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**Regeneration is God's supernatural transformation of believers.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Nicodemus** - a ruler from the Pharisees; Nicodemus was known for seeking Jesus at night to ask questions about salvation.

## PLOT

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Today's session takes us to a private conversation between Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus. Jesus taught this religious leader about the mystery of regeneration, what He described as "being born again," and how new birth was necessary to be in a right relationship with God.

## TIMELINE

### BORN AGAIN

*Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.*

### THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

*John the Baptist points others to Jesus.*

### THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

*Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.*

## NICODEMUS LEARNS OF THE NEW BIRTH

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

**1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:1-3)**

Nicodemus met with Jesus at night, maybe so his meeting wouldn't be noticed by other Pharisees, or maybe 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 complimented Jesus for the signs He 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 people should live.

Jesus' response was abrupt. He didn't accept the compliments Nicodemus gave. Instead, He simply 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 salvation.

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

**4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:4-10)**

Nicodemus' question was sincere. Because he did not understand what Jesus taught, he asked Him to clarify. 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. People don't come into this new relationship with God by simply 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.

## THE NEW BIRTH COMES THROUGH FAITH

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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:

- <sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.**
- <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.**
- <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:11-15)**

Until that point the religious leaders had rejected Jesus' testimony, which raised an important question: How could the religious leaders compliment Jesus for His teaching on any matter if they 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.

That's when 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, after God had brought them out of Egypt. They hated the food God gave them in the wilderness. They accused God of having bad intentions and claimed that God took them out there to die.

The Lord grew angry with 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 pointed 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 our sin is, and it would be the source of our salvation.

- **What did Jesus mean when He said He would be "lifted up"? Why is it important that He was "lifted up"? (p. 61, PSG)**

## THE NEW BIRTH IS THE RESULT OF GOD'S LOVE FOR HUMANITY

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

**16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**  
**17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.** <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in 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 by sending His Son, Jesus, to seek and save the lost by dying for us—while we were still in sin, separated from Him. John 3:16 reminds us that God gave Himself, in the person of His Son, to take the place of sinners like you and me.

John claims that those who reject Jesus already stand condemned before God. It's similar to a criminal who has been arrested for murder, pled not guilty, went to trial and was found guilty, received sentencing, and is now living on death row awaiting the execution sentence that's been delivered. That time from the convicting and sentencing until the time that the execution takes place is similar to the state of nonbelieving humanity. We've been condemned by our sin; all we wait for now is our execution.

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.

## TIMELINE

### HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

*Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.*

### ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

*Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.*

\*Beginning Summer 2017

### THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

*Jesus teaches on people's responses when hearing the Word.*

Regeneration (*p. 61, PSG*)

*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.*

## CHRIST CONNECTION

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 serpents' bites, but none of those remedies would have had any effect. There was only way to be healed, and it was through gazing upon the bronze snake lifted high on the pole. In a similar way, Jesus explained that 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 that those who receive Christ also receive the right to be God's children. Only those who hear the gospel and look to Jesus alone as their sole means of salvation, believe in His teachings, perfect life, substitute death, and resurrection will be born again.

# YOUR STORY

## 10-15 MINUTES

### GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What is the connection between a person's identity and the value of their testimony?** *If people demonstrate a track record of honesty and integrity, then the value of his or her testimony increases. On the other hand, if people have a history of deceit and dishonesty, then their testimony will naturally be called into question.*
- **How would you respond to someone who says they consult Jesus as a good moral guide, but they do not recognize Him as the Son of God?** *One could point out the inconsistency of affirming Jesus as a great moral leader but denying His claims to be the divine Son of God, through whom salvation is found. If He isn't who He claimed to be, then He can't be very moral in making the claim. However, since He is moral by all accounts, the people should take His claims as the Son of God to be true.*
- **How would you explain the words "faith" and "believe" from a biblical perspective?** *Having faith is another way of saying one believes that Jesus is who He says He is, and that by trusting in Him one can have forgiveness of sin.*
- **What similar words would you use? How does this passage illustrate the meaning of faith?** *Answers will vary.*

**HIS STORY**  
God's Story of  
Redemption,  
through His Son,  
Jesus Christ.

**YOUR STORY**  
Where your story  
meets His.

# YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES

## HEAD

Nicodemus wasn't all that different from many religious people today. 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. Like him, it's easy for people who have been raised in church, or who have some sort of faith in God, to believe that they have an inside track to God and His ways. But if this account teaches us anything, it teaches us about the necessity of coming to God on His terms, and not our own.

- **What was missing in the life of Nicodemus?** *He had religion, but he knew something was still missing, namely, a right relationship with God.*
- **How does Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus provide a model for how we engage with those who are religious but not committed to Christ?** *Answers will vary.*

## HEART

Unfortunately, as this passage shows us, humans naturally love darkness (the sinful deeds and lifestyle we're born into) rather than the light, Jesus Christ. We live in a society where people entertain the false understanding that one can have Jesus plus their sin, or 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. Those who come to Jesus want His light to expose all of their lives so that He can continue His work of renovating us from the inside out.

- **In what areas of your life does it feel uncomfortable for the light of Christ to shine?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does God's gift of salvation impact these areas of your life?** *Answers will vary.*

## HANDS

The work of regeneration is a supernatural work of God, not the natural work of man. Yet 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 church, Christianity, or even religion, 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.

- **How encouraging is it to know that salvation is not dependent upon how persuasive you are or how much you know, but is instead the work of God in a person's heart?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Even though salvation is God's work, why do you think the Bible stresses our role in sharing the gospel with others?** *Because faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).*

## ► ADDITIONAL INFO

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### SOURCE

1. James Roberts, *Transformers: More Than Meets The Eye, Vol. 1*, (San Diego: IDW, 2012).

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17](http://lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at  
**GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources**

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit  
**MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject**