

7. The scripture says in 1 Peter 1:23 “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” How did God use his word to change your mind? Was there one or more specific truths that finally caught your attention?

8. God clearly demonstrates his love for us in John 3:16. He loves us by sending Jesus, not because of our “good” works or religious activity, but when we were his enemies. What are the characteristics of this kind of love? How does this view of God’s love transcend our circumstances?

9. What evangelical religious systems hold us to a false belief in our salvation? (*trust in our knowledge of the Word and church activities for our standing before God*)

10. What is the difference between believing about God and believing *in* God (mental agreement versus true trust in the person of Jesus)? What are the characteristics of trust? What are the counterfeits?

11. From John 3:18-21, in what ways does John contrast belief and unbelief? What are the evidences of spiritual birth and true faith?

John 3:1-21

Lesson 4
For October 12, 2008

Dr. Jerry Nelson

LEADER’S GUIDE

For discussion following the sermon on October 12, 2008

Nicodemus

Nicodemus came at night. A respected Jewish leader, knowing and yet not hearing, came to assess the claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus was obviously a man sent by God, but was he the Messiah? Nicodemus came to Jesus for information. What he received from Jesus would surprise him. Would he believe?

Key Points

- Born again: the necessity of new birth
- Belief: Jesus, the way to salvation
- Source: God’s initiating love
- Inoculation: Self-justifying religion

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in all of scripture. It is so familiar to many of us, as well as the unbelieving world, that it is easy to gloss over the theological truths and eternal implications. We believe that “God so loved the world” that he sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins. But do we really believe enough in Jesus to trust him?

This was the challenge for Nicodemus. We may wonder how Nicodemus could have spent a lifetime studying the scriptures, living by the rules, possessing the “right” heritage, and miss salvation. Surely a religious life produces eternal life, or does it? What did he miss? What do we miss?

Jesus said that we must be born of the spirit. God, in his great love for us, initiates everything. It is he who draws us to himself. It is the *Spirit* who imparts the new birth (regenerates us), who directs us to the scriptures, who reveals our sin, who convicts us, and who enables us to respond. It is *Jesus* who died and now justifies us so

that we are no longer condemned. Regeneration and justification are all by *God's* initiative and are *God's* redeeming work. What is our response? Belief— not only to believe the facts about Jesus as plausible, but to act upon our belief by putting our trust in him. That is faith. It is important to note that new birth is not a product of our faith; our faith is a product of new birth.

Our challenge this week is to evaluate our lives in the context of our belief; do we merely believe the claims of Jesus, or do we believe *in* him? Are we tempted to put our faith in religion — our heritage, biblical knowledge, or time spent in church (or service) - and trust in these activities to impart righteousness? Are we tempted to put our faith in our actions — “I asked him into my heart, therefore I am born again?” Or is our faith/trust in the person of Jesus? If we are truly born again our lives will be a demonstration of the work of God in us through visible evidence of his grace. Have you been born again?

Leader's Guide

Personal Preparation

- Think back to your conversion experience. How long did you hear before you believed? What drew you to Christ? What questions and obstacles did you have to overcome? What has changed in your life to indicate the reality of your conversion? As you ponder these questions, ask God to help you recognize his acts of love and grace in this process. Take time to worship him for his great love and salvation through Jesus Christ.

Group Preparation

- The emphasis of this passage is on new birth: salvation through Jesus Christ. While this may seem basic for some, for others (even those in the church), it could be life-changing. The challenge is to not assume that everyone in your group is a believer. There may be those who have heard the Gospel and believe it to be true but have never put their faith in Christ. Pray especially for discernment and wisdom, and leave ample opportunity for the Spirit of God to work— don't rush things.

- You might want to end your study by encouraging the people in your group to pray for the salvation of specific people. Pray for movement from mere intellectual agreement about God to *trust in God*.

Discussion Questions

1. We can't be certain why Nicodemus came to Jesus but he was clearly surprised to hear that his religious “system” wasn't sufficient in his relationship with God. How do people respond to this today?
2. What do you think the words “born again” mean to our culture at large? Is it positive or negative?
3. What are the evidences of new birth (“born again/from above”)? (*faith/repentance, life transformation which is of the heart—not just a moral reformation*)
4. In your own words, express how this “rebirth” takes place. What does God do and what do we do? (*Regeneration (new birth) is solely God's action; faith/trust is our response.*)
5. What was one of the most significant realizations you had as an unbeliever, one that moved you from unbelief to belief? What changed your mind? What changed your heart?
6. One of the characteristics of this new birth from the Spirit is that we can't control it. “The wind blows wherever it pleases” (v. 8). How do we try to gain control of our salvation? (*What did Nicodemus do?*)