

Jesus Teaches About New Birth

Summary and Goal

In the last session, we saw how Jesus revealed His mission. In this session, we will look at Jesus' teaching on the new birth, which is necessary to be able to see and enter the kingdom of God. New birth involves all three Persons of the Trinity; it is a gift of God the Father through the work of the Holy Spirit through faith in the Son of God. The new birth is characterized by a hunger for obedience, and it motivates us to share the good news with others as we trust in the transformational power of the Spirit. The reconciling role of Christ on the cross makes possible the true and lasting transformation of our hearts through the new birth.

Session Outline

1. New birth is a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8).
2. New birth comes through faith in the Son of God (John 3:9-15).
3. New birth is a gift from God the Father (John 3:16-18).

Background Passage: John 3:1-21

Session in a Sentence

Jesus taught that the new birth is a gift from the Father and the work of the Spirit for all who believe in the Son.

Christ Connection

Jesus taught that new birth, not religious activity, is how a person enters the kingdom of God and receives eternal life. New birth is given from God the Father through faith in God the Son as a work of God the Spirit. Because of God's love, we are no longer condemned because of our sin, but we have been given eternal life in Christ.

Missional Application

Because we have been born again and have new life in Christ, we trust in God's power to continue to transform us and we call others to be born again.

Group Time

GROUP MEMBER CONTENT

Introduction

READ the paragraph in the DDG (p. 114) about a boy named Kendall and the medical treatment he received on account of the damage Kawasaki disease did to his heart.

When he was three years old, a little boy named Kendall showed signs of Kawasaki disease, a rare and potentially fatal condition that causes inflammation in blood vessels and can damage the heart. On his second day in the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Kendall’s eyes suddenly rolled to the side and he stopped breathing. He had a heart attack, and an aneurysm on one of his swollen arteries burst, filling his chest cavity with blood. Since Kendall was at the hospital, he survived with immediate surgery, but his heart was damaged beyond repair. Yet within a week, Kendall had received a donor heart and is alive and healthy today.¹

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



What thoughts and feelings might you have if you needed a new heart and then received one? (being blessed; feeling guilty for the cost behind having received a new heart; “Why me when there are others who also need a new heart?”; “I don’t deserve this”; great thankfulness to God)

EXPLAIN: Connect Kendall’s story to the spiritual condition of every human being because of sin.

- Kendall’s condition could not be solved by patching up his heart. His disease was so serious, his heart so damaged, that he needed a heart transplant—an entirely new heart—to replace the one that was broken.
- Like Kendall, our hearts are damaged beyond repair. The difference is our hearts are not plagued by a physical disease; they are rotted through and through with the spiritual disease of sin. Jesus taught that only through a completely new birth can we enter the kingdom of God.

SUMMARIZE: In this session, we will look at Jesus’ teaching on the new birth, which is necessary to be able to see and enter the kingdom of God. New birth involves all three Persons of the Trinity; it is a gift of God the Father through the work of the Holy Spirit through faith in the Son of God. The new birth is characterized by a hunger for obedience, and it motivates us to share the good news with others as we trust in the transformational power of the Spirit. The reconciling role of Christ on the cross makes possible the true and lasting transformation of our hearts through the new birth.

The additional commentary for this session is included on page 160 in this Leader Guide.

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Point 1: New birth is a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read John 3:3-8 (DDG p. 115).

³ Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ “How can anyone be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked him. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. ⁸ The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 115) to comment on Jesus’ teaching about our inability to solve our sin problem and the necessity of spiritual new birth by the Holy Spirit to overcome our sinful nature.

Our flesh is fallen, diseased with sin. Since God is holy, He cannot have sin in His kingdom. This presents an obvious problem for us: **We are sinful; thus, we cannot enter the kingdom of God as we are.** Jesus made it clear that our sin problem is one we cannot solve on our own. We cannot give ourselves a spiritual new birth any more than a dog can make herself give birth to a kitten. New birth is a work of the Spirit; it is not a physical experience but a spiritual one in which we are transformed and changed so that our nature starts to align with God’s nature.

- Often we underestimate the weight and consequence of our sin. No amount of sacrifices or religious efforts on our part will heal our spiritual disease. No heart transplant will solve this problem—we need to be born again into a completely new nature.
- Jesus compared the spiritual work of the Spirit to the wind (“spirit” and “wind” are the same word in Greek). Although we can’t comprehend the wind or see where it comes from, we see its effects plainly before us: the grass waves, the tree bends, the water swells. No one would suggest that because we can’t see the wind it does not exist. In the same way, we cannot understand the Spirit or see where the Spirit comes from, nor can we control the Spirit or bend the Spirit to our will. But we can see the transforming effects of the Spirit all the same because those who have been born again bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). We cannot remain unchanged after undergoing so radical a renewal.

Illustration: When a dog gives birth to a puppy, no one exclaims in shock that it is a puppy. No one hangs around in anticipation, wondering what species a pregnant dog will produce. The headline “Dog gives birth to puppy” won’t make the front-page news. Dogs make more dogs. A dog cannot create a kitten. Jesus taught that our spiritual new birth works the same way. By nature, flesh produces flesh; only the Spirit can birth something that is spirit.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 115).

Regeneration is the miraculous **transformation**, or the new birth, that takes place within an individual through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. It is the **divine** side of conversion, 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.

Essential Doctrine “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.

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 115) to make clear that the coming of the Spirit was not a completely newfound concept but a reality already depicted and anticipated in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament foreshadowed the new birth that would one day come in the Spirit. New birth in the Spirit had always been God's plan, a permanent solution to the sin problem the law only temporarily addressed. Nicodemus, as a Pharisee and a teacher of the law, should have recognized this.

- Two Old Testament references foreshadowing the new birth through the Holy Spirit:
 - God gave physical and spiritual life to Adam when He breathed into him (Gen. 2:7).
 - Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming to life when the breath entered the bodies describes the Lord bringing His people to life when He puts His Spirit in them (Ezek. 37:1-14).
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INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



How has the storyline of the Bible through the Old Testament demonstrated the need for the new birth? (no one was able to obey the law; in spite of God's gracious actions toward the Israelites, they continued to rebel against Him at almost every turn; though Adam and Eve did not begin with a sinful nature, they still sinned against God and cursed all of humanity after them with a sinful nature; the sacrifices to atone for sin were only a temporary measure and had to be repeated day after day, year after year)

Point 2: New birth comes through faith in the Son of God (John 3:9-15).

READ John 3:9-15 (DDG p. 116).

⁹ “How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.

¹⁰ “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Jesus replied.

¹¹ “Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man.

¹⁴ “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 116) to affirm that only Jesus possessed the knowledge and authority to explain the new birth.

We often rely on learning from the knowledge of people who have become experts in their field. But only Jesus could provide the necessary teaching to answer Nicodemus’s question “How can these things be?” Jesus alone was able to explain the new birth, and His teaching is certainly trustworthy because He has divine authority. He has come down to us from heaven and possesses wisdom beyond our wildest imagination. As the eternally begotten Son of God, Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. His authority is unshakable and more worthy of trust than the most educated of our earthly teachers.

- Prior to Jesus, there was no human expert on heavenly things who could teach the world. No one ever ascended up into heaven and then came back down to talk about it. Even the two Old Testament people who went up to heaven apart from death—Enoch (Gen. 5:21-24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11)—never came back to earth bearing the wisdom that can only be found there. Jesus, however, did possess heavenly wisdom, not because He had ascended into heaven, learned it, and returned with it but because He, the Word, created the heavens and the earth, dwelled in heaven, and descended from there to earth as the embodiment of God’s wisdom (John 1:1-3,14; Col. 2:2-3).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



What are some reasons we should trust Jesus’ teaching? (He is the Word and wisdom of God; He is the Son of God; He created everything and holds all things together, so He knows what He is talking about; everything He said is good and true; He foretold His crucifixion and resurrection, so we can trust what He has taught us)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 116) to show how Jesus presented Himself as the answer to Nicodemus’s question by comparing His eventual work on the cross to the bronze snake in the wilderness.

The answer to Nicodemus’s question “How can these things be?” is Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus, like the bronze snake, was lifted up on the cross, both physically and figuratively. He was physically elevated on the cross, raised up on the beams of wood, which played into His figurative elevation at the cross, being raised up by God for a time of suffering to accomplish our salvation. Just as the bronze snake was the conduit of God’s love and grace to heal the Israelites, so Jesus is the demonstration of God’s love and grace to save sinners.



Voices from Church History

“Salvation comes through a cross and a crucified Christ. Salvation is the fellowship with the crucified Christ in the spirit of his cross. Salvation is union with and delight in, salvation is participation in, the humility of Jesus.”²

—Andrew Murray (1828-1917)

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- Jesus recalled the story of Moses and the bronze serpent (Num. 21:4-9), in which the disobedient Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes and would die unless they looked at the image of a bronze snake mounted on a pole. New life was given to all who gazed upon the snake. It was lifted up that all may have the opportunity to see it and be saved from the consequences of their disobedience.
 - The cross was a thing of shame in Roman times, a publicly humiliating and excruciating way to die reserved for the most lowly of criminals. But Christ transformed His cross into a thing of glory and honor. He was obedient to the Father even unto death and stopped at nothing to free all those who believe in Him from the power of sin and death. The cross of Christ has become a symbol of victory. Instead of reminding us of death, it points us to new life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Christ’s sacrifice, we may receive eternal life if we believe in Him. This is how, as Nicodemus inquired, “these things can be.” What was once impossible on our own is now made possible in Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection grant us new birth and eternal life by faith.

Illustration: Giving birth is a painful and laborious process, but sometimes a natural birth is not possible because of the high risk of harm for the mother, the child, or both. In such instances, a Cesarean section, or C-section, is typically performed. The baby is removed from the mother’s womb through her abdomen by a surgical team. Sometimes a birth just isn’t possible without the intervention of someone else. Our spiritual new birth is impossible without the intervention of Jesus Christ.

PACK ITEM 13: LIFE ITSELF DIED: Call attention to the **Augustine quote** on this poster to emphasize the importance of Jesus’ crucifixion for our new birth (life) as you transition to the next point about Jesus being given as the Father’s gift to secure our eternal life.

Point 3: New birth is a gift from God the Father (John 3:16-18).

SAY: As discussed previously, new birth only comes by the Spirit. We cannot accomplish new birth by our flesh; rather, it must flow from God. Also previously established, new birth by the Spirit is only possible through the Son. Through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our debt is paid and we are put in a position to receive new birth in the Spirit. But God the Father is also involved in the new birth.

READ John 3:16-18 (DDG p. 117).

¹⁶ For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 117) to focus on the new birth as a **Trinitarian** work: Salvation is a gift given to us by God the **Father**, obtained for us through God the **Son's** death and resurrection, and initiated in us by God the Holy **Spirit**.

The doctrine of the **Trinity** is an important belief for the Christian, and all three Persons of the Trinity—the **Father**, the **Son**, and the **Spirit**—are at work in the new birth of believers. This passage highlights that not only does new birth involve the Spirit and the Son but it originates as a gift from the Father. God the Father gave the gift of His Son for our salvation, and this gift came with a terrible, high price—the death of His one and only Son so that we would not perish in our sin.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



What are some ways we should respond to God for the gift of His Son? (worship; gratitude; humility; faith in Jesus; trust in His love and grace for us; joyful submission and obedience to His will)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 117) to stress that God loves the world not because the world is lovable but because love is His nature; therefore, God sent His Son so we would not be condemned.

John tells us that the reason God sent His one and only Son to die a terrible death and pay the price for our sins was because He loved the world. God loves the world not because the world is lovable but because love is His nature. John tells us explicitly in his first epistle, or letter, that God *is* love (1 John 4:8,16). The posture of His heart is not away from us or against us but rather turned toward us. We have a God who willingly and continually has His arms open wide ready to receive us.

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- Apart from God’s grace in Jesus, we already stand in a position of condemnation because our relationship with God is broken by our sin. We are not standing on neutral ground, as if we have the choice before us to mess up and perish or do right and receive eternal life. No, we are either with God or against Him (Matt. 12:30), and because we are sinners, we already stand condemned. The miraculous thing, however, is that believing in Jesus, the Son whom God sent, gives us the way out of our impending peril.

Application: As believers, we have an urgent calling to share the good news of God’s love that enables new birth unto eternal life for our neighbors. God’s love is very great and creates an opportunity for the world to be saved from their condemnation. In seeing our deep need for the Father’s love and having experienced it by faith in Christ, we are compelled outward—out of our churches and out of ourselves—toward a dying, broken, and hurting world desperately in need of the same love we have received. Since we have been loved with so great a love, we are enabled to love God and love others (1 John 4:19).

Illustration: “A certain medieval monk announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on ‘The Love of God.’ As the shadows fell and light ceased to come in through the great cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns; next, the two wounded hands; then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say. The love of God is Jesus’ life given for us.”³

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 117).

God Is Love: The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a **sign** that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn’t the giving of earthly goods but the giving of **Himself** in Christ so that we might become **reconciled** to Him.

Essential Doctrine “God Is Love”: To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that perfect love both resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a **sign** that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn’t the giving of earthly goods but the giving of **Himself** in Christ so that we might become **reconciled** to Him.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



How does the loving God of the Bible contrast with the ways the world views Him? (some in the world see God as a moral monster; some believe that God is disinterested in His creation and creatures; some don’t believe God exists at all; some in the world see the God of the Bible as spiteful and hateful; some fail to see and believe that God loves the world and gave His Son so people might be saved from their sin)

My Mission

EXPLAIN: Jesus taught that new birth, not religious activity, is how a person enters the kingdom of God and receives eternal life. New birth is given from God the Father through faith in God the Son as a work of God the Spirit. Because of God's love, we are no longer condemned because of our sin, but we have been given eternal life in Christ. God's love toward us flows out of His loving nature, not because of our loveliness. Understanding God's great love for us as sinners ought to motivate us to share that love with others. We get to be about the Father's business of carrying His love and sharing the gospel wherever we go. By His Spirit within us, we carry the treasure—the best news there is—that God so loved the world that He sacrificed His Son to save it. It is to this mission that we have been called so others may believe in Jesus and be born again.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 118), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God's Word.

Because we have been born again and have new life in Christ, we trust in God's power to continue to transform us and we call others to be born again.

- **How will you respond in faith to the God of love who gave His only Son to save the world?**
- **What are some ways your church/group can reach out to those in your community who are hurting and in need of the good news that God loves them?**
- **What steps will you take toward sharing the gospel of Christ with others this week?**

Voices from the Church

“True love will motivate us to make sacrifices that might even cost us our lives. Such sacrificial love makes God's heart glad. This kind of love is worth it.”⁴

—*Africa Study Bible*

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, every good and perfect gift comes from above, including the new birth. We thank You for the eternal life that You made possible through Your Son Jesus' death and resurrection, which we receive by faith in tandem with the Holy Spirit's work in us. As those already transformed by grace, instill in us a desire to proclaim the gospel to others so that they too might experience the gracious transformation of the new birth. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 119-121), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 121) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God's Word.

Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 119-121) will help group members get into God's Word and study it for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 121) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 119-121) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 4** as a part of point 3 in the session: **Jesus explains that He did not come into the world to condemn the world because it already is condemned. If anything is not fair, then it is not that people are condemned but rather that some people are saved.**



Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God's Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 2:** “The Holy Spirit guides us to understand truth—all of the truth in Scripture, even the more challenging parts.”
- **Day 5:** “The only reason you are now walking in the light is because of the kindness of God—His gift in Christ made known to you by the Holy Spirit.”



Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God's Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member's DDG (p. 121) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to pray together for specific people whom they desire to see experience the new birth and eternal life in Christ.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.