

# JOHN — WEEK 4

## BORN AGAIN



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

This week covers Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus, where He introduces the concept of being born again. Nicodemus doesn't understand.

But the key point isn't how we get saved; it's that Jesus was sent.

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John, Week 4 — Born Again  
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1 John 3:1–3

*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.”*

*Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Notice that Jesus isn’t answering Nicodemus’s question when He says, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” Nicodemus didn’t ask a question; he made a statement, “*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.*” Where is Jesus going with this? How does His response fit what Nicodemus said?

It might not fit what he said. Sometimes Jesus responds to what someone is thinking before they ask anything. But if that’s the case here, where was Nicodemus going with his opening statement?

He identifies Jesus as “*from God*” and whom “*God is with.*” That could lead to almost anything about God and His agenda in sending Jesus. Nicodemus might not have even formulated his question yet.

Which would make this interaction totally typical of interactions with Jesus. People don’t usually know what to ask. They’re just awed and want Him to teach.

That’s what this is.

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This same lesson applies to how we should pray. He is Lord, and we’re His servants. So, what should we say when we talk to Him?

“Lord, teach me.” “Lord, what would you have me do today?” “What is Your will for my life?”

It’s also okay to ask for favors—He commands us to do that—but we know little of what we really need. Mostly what we need is direction.

This gets back to the previous point about Matthew 7:21-23. Jesus holds up people who have “*prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name,*” as **prime** examples of the unsaved. How curious. What about those things stands out?

It’s that they seem extraordinarily good! These are the top, most extraordinary works. How does that make them prime examples of things done by the unsaved?

It’s that they are so obviously “God’s will” that these guys didn’t think to check and see if God really wants them to do them. They’re thinking things like, “You can’t go wrong with casting out demons.”

But you can. No “good” work is exempt from the rule that you must seek God’s will before acting.

2 John 3:3–8

*Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

*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?”*

*Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

The kingdom of God is different. Repentance (metanoia in Greek) is more than mere remorse or regret. It’s a turning away from what you regret. That’s significant.

But this is something else. Conversion to any religion can involve repentance. Entering the kingdom of God is much more than that. You don’t “join” the kingdom of God; you’re birthed into it. That’s metanoia on steroids. You don’t just turn away from the old; you turn into something new.

But by wording this so that it sounds like a repeat physical birth, Jesus confuses Nicodemus. That gets his brain fully engaged. So he asks, “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*”

Jesus clarifies that this is not being “*born of the flesh,*” but being “*born of the Spirit.*”

Then it gets really interesting. *Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” What’s that all about?

This analogy is based on the fact that in their language the same word means both spirit and wind. In Greek, it’s *pneumatos*—from which we get pneumatic and pneumonia. In Hebrew its *rue-akh*. The fact that both Biblical languages don’t distinguish between wind and the spirit speaks volumes. And note that Jesus first said that *unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

Jesus’s point is that people can’t see, much less understand, the spirit of God. It’s like the wind. And you can’t even see, much less enter, the kingdom of God unless you do something much more than just repent.

The old you just won’t cut it.

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*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. — Romans 12:2*

So, it gets even more interesting. Spiritual birth happens once, but transformation happens over and over.

3 John 3:9–12

*Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”*

*Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”*

Jesus’s teaching has knocked Nicodemus back on his heels. He’s not asking, “How does this happen?” or, “How does this work?” He’s asking, “How is this possible?” It’s an honest question.

As Jesus notes though, a Pharisee should know how the spirit of God works, at least in this world. Still, this criticism sounds harsh. It is, but it’s not directed solely at Nicodemus. “You” at the end of verse 11 (*you do not receive Our witness*), and in all of verse 12, is plural. “You” there means “the Pharisees.”

Jesus isn’t busting on the Pharisees so much as on the training the Pharisees have received. They’ve memorized great amounts of the Bible. They’ve pledged to follow the law and made great efforts to interpret it. They long for the messiah. Yet Nicodemus came to Jesus *by night* because there’s peer pressure on him to avoid Him.

Despite all this study, the Pharisees don’t recognize the messiah when He’s standing right in front of them. Now we see from Nicodemus’s response that the basics of how to see or enter the kingdom of heaven strike Pharisees as impossible.

They can’t see the forest for the trees!

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This is a common colloquialism because it’s a common phenomenon. The Pharisees got sucked into the minutiae of the law and lost sight of what it’s all about. That happens a lot because the minutiae are more interesting.

When something is easy or obvious, it doesn’t need to be debated, so it doesn’t get much attention. Meanwhile, the tricky subjects get discussed all the time. So we end up thinking about the tough stuff all the time and the easy stuff gets ignored, even if it’s important. That’s how we miss the forest for the trees.

This is especially important with respect to the gospel. I love to teach advanced doctrines, but understanding the intricacies of how the plan of salvation works is not the key to salvation.

Confess Jesus as Lord of your life. Seek God’s will in all things. Trust Him. Obey Him. He is Lord and we’re His servants.

It all boils down to one word—fealty.

4 John 3:13–16

*“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.”*

It's unfortunate that John 3:16 is so often memorized out of context. The word, “for” at the beginning (“gar” in Greek) means Jesus is explaining what He just said. Out of context, it sounds like Jesus is explaining why he saved us. That's not wrong; it's just that in context, He's mostly explaining why He came.

This is a recurring theme throughout the gospels. Jesus was sent. The incarnation is God's spectacular plan to glorify Himself. Christmas is our biggest holiday for a reason.

Resurrection is cool, and provides the best evidence that Christianity is true, but it's a straightforward miracle. We don't fully even understand what incarnation is. It's like a composer becoming a note or an artist becoming a brush stroke.

Unfortunately, we tend to focus on how all this affects us—how we get saved. That's understandable and not even all that sinful, but we miss the best part—how it's all about God's glory.

When we use John 3:16 out of context, we erroneously see the gospel as all about us. It's about God.

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So, Moses lifting up the serpent in chapter 21 of Numbers was part of the plan all along.

*Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. — Numbers 21:6–9*

The irony here is important. Just looking at a bronze serpent couldn't possibly have any natural curative powers. It's all about faith. Plus a bronze serpent is a model of the problem, not its solution. Yet God specifically tells Moses to make this symbol, to raise it on a pole, and to have everyone look up at it.

This foreshadows Jesus on the cross. The punishment for sin is cured by looking up to the cross—the symbol of Roman punishment for sin.

James Tissot's painting “View from the Cross” captures this concept perfectly. It's a chilling portrait of people looking up to the cross from Jesus's point of view.

<https://www.artbible.info/art/large/495.html>

5 John 3:17–21

*“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*

*“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”*

This passage expands the point about Jesus being sent; He came on a rescue mission. He didn't come to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. We were condemned already.

Then Jesus makes a deeper point—people inflict the punishment on themselves.

*And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*

The condemnation **is** their love of darkness.

*For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*

Remind you of something?

*Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, “Where are you?”*

*So he said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.”*

*And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?” — Genesis 3:9–11*

It's not that God pushes people away because of their sin. They push God away because of their sin.

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The pop culture vision of hell is that it's torture because it's hot. The true vision of hell is that separation from God is what makes it hell.

If someone chooses to separate from God—because they want to hide their sin from His eyes—then they literally make this life a living hell.

And so we find ourselves back at Matthew 7:21–23. What would Jesus say to someone who pushed Him away their entire life so they could stay out of the light.

“I never knew you.”

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Ever had a “great” idea turn out to be bad?
2. What was your biggest transformation after your conversion?
3. When has someone missed the big picture due to over-attention to details?
4. What is the most striking thing in Tissot's painting?
5. Do you see the love of darkness in our society?

*Items for prayer:*