

TUTORIAL

1.41

Jesus taught the necessity of the “new birth”

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **John 3:1-21**.

Last time

Jesus began to emerge as a teacher in northern Palestine at the same time that John’s role was concluding. His message, like John’s, called for repentance from sin. But Jesus was also telling the people the good news that He had come to make it possible for them to live with God as their true Ruler, instead of being led by Satan and sin. Jesus began to choose some men to be His followers, His disciples. He travelled to different communities, initially in the region of Galilee, demonstrating His authority by His teaching, by the way evil spirits obeyed His commands, and by healing many sick people.

The religious leaders are threatened by Jesus and His teaching

We continue the Narrative with an incident that John records – not John the baptiser, of course, who by now is in prison or already executed – this is John, the brother of James, one of the fishermen Jesus invited to follow Him. He describes a conversation that Jesus has one night with a Jewish religious leader, Nicodemus. (John 3:1-21) Indications later in the Narrative are that he is wealthy. He is also a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of 71 leaders with ultimate authority on Jewish civil and religious law. They have extensive judicial powers, although with some restrictions under Roman rule. But anyone like John the baptiser, or now this Galilean teacher Jesus, who is drawing crowds through His teaching and healing, poses a potential threat to the status quo...and to the delicate political balancing act that is needed under the Roman occupation. He’s beginning to make radical claims about who He is, and the role God has given Him in providing a way back to God.

And His teaching is threatening the basis of the leaders’ influence over the people. He’s saying that everyone is equally sinners...that no one can be made acceptable through following the oral or written traditions...that no one can

even come close to fulfilling the Law of Moses. This was intolerable. Their hold on the people was maintained through their intricate knowledge of those very laws and traditions, and by their claim to fulfill them to the letter. And they were willing to go to incredible lengths to be seen publicly to do exactly that. If the people began to believe that those things did not produce righteousness and that they, their religious leaders, were just as guilty in God's eyes as prostitutes or even Samaritans...well, something must be done to stop this! They'd tried to discredit Jesus, claimed that if He was actually healing people and throwing demons out then it was through the power of Satan. But that had backfired, they'd been made to appear ridiculous. They'd sent delegations to try to trip Him up on finer points of the law, to get Him to say something heretical, but His knowledge of God's Word was amazing. People were contrasting their Scriptural acumen unfavourably with His.

Nicodemus is confused by Jesus' statement about being born again

So when one of their number, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, wants to talk with Jesus, it's not surprising he does so under the cover of darkness. His opening statements make it clear he doesn't share his colleagues' perspective of Jesus. He calls him "Rabbi", Teacher, and acknowledges that the miracles Jesus has done show that He's been sent by God.

Jesus' response is unsettling, confronting, confusing. He says that for Nicodemus to be one of God's people, under His rule, he has to be born again. But what can He mean? Yes, that's something you say about an outcast Gentile wanting to become a Jew...certainly, *they* need to be reborn. But he's one of God's chosen people. He and his fellow Pharisees have always prided themselves on being descendants of Abraham. God's family. Jesus must be talking about some physical thing, it's ludicrous, impossible. But Jesus is adamant that the only way to escape the rule of Satan and sin and death, and to be one of God's people, under His rule, takes a particular kind of birth. No, it's not a physical birth. Being born the first time is how Nicodemus and all humans inherited the sin and death that mark them as Adam's lost race. Everyone who has only been born once like that is under the rule of God's Enemy, the usurper who has set up a false kingdom on earth. Everyone is born with that identity and also makes the same rebellious choices as their ancestors.

And that is the same for Abraham's descendants, the same for the most religious, the most devout and sincere people like Nicodemus. In that sense, being an expert in religious traditions, acquiring a lot of knowledge about the Scriptures, knowing it off by heart...doesn't achieve anything. Even acknowledging that Jesus comes from God doesn't deal with the essential problem of birth. It doesn't take care of the issue of sin. So how does this mysterious second birth take place? It is the work of God's Spirit. It's not visible

or perceived by humans, much less something they have power over. It's a miracle of the highest order. He doesn't force it on people, but when they are humbly willing to listen, to believe Him, then He uses His Word, His wonderful Narrative about Himself and all that's true. He helps them to understand and apply it in their hearts, in their spirits, and like some amazing water, clean beyond anything we can imagine, it changes them – they're washed and made new. A new person.

Jesus lays out clearly why He came to the earth

When Nicodemus is still confused, Jesus wonders out loud how a respected Jewish teacher can be ignorant about these things. But of course, in contrast, Jesus notes, *He* can speak with total eye-witness authority and certainty. He's not trying to work these things out from a limited, earth-bound perspective. He comes directly from God, and so the things He says should be believed for that reason. He uses a favourite term of reference for Himself, the Son of Man. He's the Son of God who has become a man. And He tells Nicodemus that He will be lifted up in a very similar way to the bronze snake Moses lifted up when the Israelites were bitten during their wilderness wandering. Of course this story from the Old Testament Narrative was very familiar to Nicodemus, but what was all this talk of Jesus being lifted up like that?

Jesus continues making spiritual applications from physical metaphors. When He is lifted up, those who believe in Him will have eternal life. Like the Israelites who had no way to save themselves from physical death, all human beings, religious or not, descendants of Abraham or not, have no way of escaping the spiritual separation from God that is the result of their sin. But those who believe in Him, in Jesus, God's Son who became a man, will be born again into God's family and given eternal life.

Jesus went on to make a statement that would become one of the most famous in the entire Bible – what we identify as the 16th verse in the 3rd chapter of John's account. God, He tells Nicodemus, loved the entire world – all of His lost race of corrupted image-bearers. Because of His love He sent His Son as the Messiah, the Deliverer – Jesus. He did this so that anyone who would believe in Him would not suffer the destruction that was the just payment for their sins.

In fact, incredibly, they will be saved, rescued, and be given eternal life.

Although Jesus, like John, is teaching clearly about people's sin and their true condition before God, He didn't come as judge and executioner. The fact that everyone has sinned means that their sentence has already been passed. God doesn't want people to pay that horrendous sentence, but if they refuse to believe in His Son who He sent, then there's no escape for them. Tragically, even though God has shone light into this dark world marred and torn up by sin, many choose to scurry away from that light back to the darkness. They don't want to have their lives exposed. They don't want to have

to give up what they wrongly think of as their freedom, their rights. God graciously sent the light, His Son Jesus, and He continues to shine that light today. Some, a few, are drawn to it: glimpsing what a wonderful gift and incredible opportunity this represents, they believe in God's Son and are restored to the relationship He always intended for His image-bearers. They become His people. His born-again children.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Jesus taught the necessity of the "new birth"

1. What factors do you think make it possible for religious experts like the Pharisees to be extremely familiar with the written record of God's Story and yet fail to understand the most important things He is communicating? What kind of presuppositions and worldview commitments do you suspect were involved?
2. What is your personal response to Jesus' statement about the lengths God was willing to go because of His love for the world? Based on the Narrative so far consider: (a) what did He mean by the term "world", (b) do you have any responsibilities toward that "world"?
3. What exactly is the "Good News", the Gospel, that comes out in this portion of the Narrative? Is Jesus statement to Nicodemus that he must be born again the Gospel, or not?



ACTIVITIES

Jesus taught the necessity of the "new birth"

1. Do some research about the Jewish Sanhedrin and write a half page description in your own words. Try to find out its composition, the extent and limits of its powers under Roman rule, its relationship to the Herodian monarchy etc.