



YEAR 1—The God of Life: A Story of God's Redeeming Shalom

Module 4—Coming Alive by Being Human: Jesus Stories on What it Means to Be Human and Fully Alive

Lesson 5—John 3:1-21

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

GOD'S STORY

Nicodemus rightly begins this story with God. All of Jesus' miracles and signs are the work of God's restoration of life for the sake of those for whom they are done. The presence of God in Jesus is palpable for in Jesus God is present in the world. The work that Jesus is doing in the world is the fulfillment and advancement of God's life-giving mission to all of creation. So, therefore, is the process of being born again. Nicodemus asks, "How can we be born again? How can we make this happen once we have already been born?" Another way of phrasing Nicodemus' question is like this: how can I make myself into something new? What do I have to do in order to be born again?

Trying to make this passage into a formula for how to be born again misses the fact that Jesus is drawing us back to consider the way in which God has been at work all along throughout history, working to bring about life for us. The kind of new birth that Jesus has in mind is similar to creation in Genesis 1, or Ezekiel 37 when God's Spirit breathes life into the valley of dry bones. It is a work of God's generating Spirit, hovering over our lives and breathing new life into us in order that we may truly live again as God has intended us to from the beginning. To be born again is a not new religious program with step-by-step instructions for how to get in on God's way of life. Being born again is a movement of God's Spirit blowing fresh life into our very being in order that we may see and know what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. To be born again is an awakening from God's Spirit to recognize in the crucified Jesus the very grace of God for us, and to be transformed to walk in the way of Jesus now as children of light.

As God's story, this passage reminds us that the promise of life that God extends to us in Jesus Christ is first and foremost his action. God's mission is to bring about new life for creation in and through Jesus Christ, and as we'll consider, we play a role in that. Nonetheless, God's mission is God's mission. God acts first, and our lives are a response to the goodness of God in Jesus Christ, who remakes us into the people God created us to be, agents of life and light in the world.

OUR STORY

When God's Spirit breathes new life into us, we are born anew into our true humanity in Jesus Christ. Our lives are reshaped by God's Spirit in order that we begin to live into the calling of God to be fully human. We are transformed by God's Spirit to participate in God's mission of restoring the world to its intended wholeness. So even as we emphasize again that being born again in Jesus Christ is the work of God in our lives, this new birth includes our active response, which Jesus describes as belief in him. In being born again we come to believe that Jesus has and is leading us into the fullness of life with God. Yet what is meant by belief is perhaps more rich than we commonly assume.

If being born again means we are transformed to participate in the fullness of life with Jesus, then belief in Jesus cannot just mean thinking the right things about Jesus. Knowing in the core of our being that Jesus is indeed the one who saves us and brings us into the fullness of life with God is absolutely part of what it means to be born again. We see in Jesus that we are forgiven, ushered into new life and that this is God's plan for our salvation. Understanding this through God's Spirit draws us to want to live differently, to put our belief into action. When belief and action align, as we actually begin to practice the way of Jesus, then we know that God's Spirit is at work bringing us into our new humanity. Then we are actually beginning to live from the reality of our new birth in Jesus Christ. We are born again as people living in the light of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Being born anew into our true humanity and through belief stepping into the light of God's grace in Jesus Christ does not mean that suddenly our lives become perfect. We do not instantly become fully grown followers of Jesus. Our belief in Jesus and our action do not always align well. Yet God's Spirit is still at work, drawing us into the light which exposes the way in which our belief in Jesus and the response of conforming our lives to his do not always match up. To be people born again into the light of God's grace is to become people who do not shy away from this process, and do not attempt to avoid the way in which God's Spirit works to bring us more and more into conformity with Christ's way of life. This is the process of discipleship, of growing as people called to bear witness to Jesus by allowing our lives to correspond to his. In fact, rather than see this process as a negative, we see it as the continuing work of God in our lives to bring us into the fullness of life he intends for us.

OTHERS' STORY

The portrayal of others in this story can be viewed rather negatively. Jesus portrays those who do not believe in him as those who are living outside of God's life-giving salvation in the darkness of sin and death. When they encounter the light of God's offer of life in Jesus Christ, they remain in their darkness instead because they are in some sense attached to the sin. To enter into life with Jesus would mean exposure of the ways in which they are still in denial of God's life for them, a radical transformation of who they are. They would have to relent to God's desire to usher them into new birth. For some that is simply too much. Is there anything in this story that speaks of hope for others?

For many people their greatest fear in following Jesus is well placed—they recognize that their life would need a U-turn, that the life that they have chosen for themselves is not the one Jesus is calling them to. If we are honest, we share these fears from time to time. To release control over our lives to God's Spirit to remake us into the image of Jesus, to be exposed to the light of God's grace, while ultimately for our good, also cuts against our normal way of being. This is why when Jesus calls us to believe in him, he is asking us to not only believe in our minds but for our actions to bear witness to his way of life for others.

This passage is ultimately good news for others. "For God so loved the world," is a message about God's love that gives birth to new life for us and others when we follow Jesus. Living as people of light in and through Jesus means that we proclaim the good news that God so loves the world with our lives. We live openly before others, even as they attempt to hide in their darkness. The community of God's people drawn together by God's Spirit to participate in the newness of life offered in Jesus Christ is to live among those in darkness in the light of Jesus. The community is to compel people to step out of their sin and into the light of Jesus, and thus to discover, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the fullness of life. This story is for others as it compels the church to be an evangelizing community, letting its life together be filled with the light of Jesus Christ in order that others may discover the good news that Christ has been lifted up to death in their place, and therefore there is now no condemnation for them in Jesus Christ.

THE WORLD'S STORY

We have a tendency to identify the work of God's Spirit bringing about new birth with our own tribe. Only those who have the exact beliefs as us are those who have truly been born again. Only those who worship in the way we worship are truly a part of God's light. We may make certain exceptions, but we often think it is up to us to identify who has and has not been born again. This story guards us against that common temptation when we read it closely. This is the world's story because Jesus expresses the universality of God's life-giving mission.

To begin with, Jesus instructs Nicodemus to not be surprised at the way in which the Spirit brings about new birth for people. The Spirit blows where it pleases, and the Spirit is bringing about newness of life in Jesus Christ in all kinds of surprising places. When Jesus says that whoever believes in him will be saved, Jesus really means whoever. This term is not meant to limit the number of people. Instead, Jesus is exploding open the boundaries and categories we place around who gets to experience new birth. In essence he is saying to Nicodemus, "This new birth into life with God isn't just for the Jews. It's for everyone! It's for the whole world!" We do well to listen to Jesus on that point.

We are quite prone to use this story to determine who truly has been born again, wondering if a person has prayed in the right way to receive Jesus and the Spirit, or gone through the appropriate kind of baptism. If there is a way to limit the expansiveness of God's offer of life in Jesus, we can figure it out. This story is the world's story, though. We are reminded that this gospel is for all, that God's life in Jesus Christ is boundary-breaking and that God's Spirit is at work as God sees fit, drawing together a people who will live in God's light from all sorts of different backgrounds. Because the work of new birth is first God's story, we can't control it. And, God is intent on bringing the wholeness of life not just to us, but to the entire world. "For God so loved the world . . ."