**ADULT STS LESSON 135\_ THE NEW BIRTH AND JOHN’S MINISTRY**

**MEMORY VERSE: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). TEXT: John 3:1-36**

This lesson focuses on the ministry of Christ to individuals. It is amazing that as large as Christ’s congregation was, He still had time to attend to the needs of individual seekers. Those who felt that their questions were not sufficiently dealt with publicly sought audience with Him privately. This group is represented by Nicodemus in our study. Though some scholars suggest that Nicodemus could have chosen such time out of fear, cowardice and shame of being seen with Christ, it is, nonetheless, encouraging to note that Christ heartily welcomed him, answered his questions and led him to the everlasting truth. From this, we learn that God is interested in finding and changing people whom mankind considers out of reach because of their social, financial or religious status in the society. Gospel ministers should promptly attend to all sincere seekers who may not have followed the laid down rules and regulations in their quest for the truth and salvation.

**PICTURE OF A SINCERE SEEKER AND HEART REGENERATION** (John 3:1-8; 1:12; Isaiah 55:6,7; Jeremiah 29:11-14; Ephesians 2:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Romans 6:6-22; 8:8-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17: Galatians 5:22-25).

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:” (John 3:1). Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He did not deem it sufficient to hear His public discourses; thus he resolved to see Christ privately, perhaps to avoid unnecessary distractions and opposition from fellow Pharisees or the general public. Though a learned teacher himself, he came to know more. This teaches that however intelligent or educated we may be, we should create time to come to Jesus to learn and obey His word. Though Nicodemus came secretly by night, his encounter with Christ led him to inner transformation experience and changed his perspective of Him. Thus, he was one of those who stood for Christ publicly thereafter (John 7:50,51; 19:39). His role at His burial is another pointer to what Christ’s word had achieved in his heart (John 19:39,40). Whereas he was In the camp of the foes of the Lord, he afterward became His friend, though still a member of the community of Pharisees. No one can tell what a sincere seekers could become tomorrow in the kingdom of God. Faith which at first may appear like a mustard seed, can grow to be a great tree yielding pleasant fruits of righteousness. Regeneration is a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith. It is the work of the Holy Spirit by which a soul, previously dead in sins and trespasses is recreated in Christ unto righteousness. The result of this work is the restoration of God’s image to the saved soul and impartation of the divine love for others. It must be stressed, however, that a kind of regeneration that does not produce a new life, faith, righteousness and godliness is doubtful. This new birth is a glorious and spiritual experience. It happens when a convicted sinner comes to God with godly sorrow, turns to Him in total repentance, faith in the finished work at Calvary, and forsakes all evil ways. Such a soul is forgiven and becomes a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). This transformation, which affects every aspect of life after salvation, is universal. Those who are truly born again are totally free from sin and its bondage (John 8:32,36; Romans 6:14-23). With the impartation of God’s grace, they are enabled to live a life that is pleasing to God. The new birth cannot be equated with physical birth because God’s relationship with a believer is a matter of the Holy Spirit rather than the flesh (John 3:6).

**THE DANGER OF BEING RELIGIOUS WITHOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS** (John 3:4,9-13; Mark 10:17-27; John 8:31-45; Romans 2:13, 16-24; Matthew 7:21-23; Galatians 5:3-6; 1 Samuel 16:7)

In spite of the Pharisees’ much profession of religion, they were neck-deep in sin. Though they rigidly interpreted the letter of the Mosaic Law, they often violated its practice and spirit by their traditional and false interpretations (Matthew 12:2-8; 23:23). On numerous occasions, Christ denounced them for their pride, covetousness, ostentation in prayers, unscriptural manner of almsgiving and tithing (Matthew 6:2,5; Luke 18:9). He also denounced them for employing the garb of religion to cover their profligate dispositions and conducts (Matthew 23:1-39; Luke 16:14; John 7:48,49; 8:9). As a result, they hated Him (Matthew 12:14) and eagerly sought to destroy Him. Religious practices do not cure the natural person from inward tendencies to commit sin, neither can they atone for committed sins. Jesus told the rich young ruler who tried to justify himself, “one thing thou lackest…” (Mark 10:21). Some people think that helping the less-privileged will qualify them for God’s kingdom. Every religious person at his or her best lacks the righteousness of Christ, which comes only through heart regeneration made possible by the new birth. Unless a person exercises absolute faith in the atoning blood of Christ, he or she cannot enter God’s kingdom. Mere works of righteousness cannot qualify us for God’s kingdom, for then would all the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus’ day have express visa into God’s kingdom. Only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross can atone for and cleanse the heart from wickedness (Jeremiah 17:9; 1 John 1:7-9). The clear injunction from Christ remains, “ye must be born again” (John 3:7).

**THE PLACE OF FAITH IN THE NEW BIRTH EXPERIENCEE** (John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 3:6-9; Romans 1:14-17)

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). This is the gospel in a nutshell. God’s offer of His only begotten Son was purely an act of love. Herein, He sets the pattern of true love, the basis of all godly relationships. Because He loves us dearly, no sacrifice was too great for Him to make for our redemption. Christ’s sacrifice was meant to make humanity escape the wrath of God and be saved. “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (verse 17). This is the universal gospel, the good news for all irrespective of nation, race, status, age, gender or time. It is a perfect sacrifice for “whosoever believeth…” Salvation is full and free for all, and this offer of eternal life from the ever-loving God is still open to all today. But its rich benefits are appropriated by faith. We must exercise faith in Christ’s sacrifice to be free from the power, influence and consequences of sin. To “believe in him” means more than an Intellectual agreement that Jesus is God: it means accepting Him as the Lord of one’s life. It means trusting His word and relying on Him for power to begin the new life after believing that He is our Saviour.

**POTENT EXAMPLE AND TESTIMONY OF JOHN** (John 3:22-26; 5:35; 3:27-36; Matthew 3:11; John 1:15,26,27; 1:14; Hebrews 1:8-10; Revelation 2:13-18; Genesis 3:16; 12:2,3; John 6:28,29; Hebrews 2:16)

John the Baptist neither thought it appropriate to halt his ministry as soon as Christ commenced His. The expression, “For John was not yet cast into prison” (verse 24) suggests that but for his incarceration, John would have continued in his ministry long after the manifestation of Christ, notwithstanding His growing success. Secondly, Christ’s superior, more successful ministry did not render the ministry of the Baptist unnecessary. Neither our Lord nor John felt the need to terminate a less effective ministry upon the advent of a superior one. Both the servant that received five talents and the one that was endowed with only two were called to account for them, and were commended in exactly the same words: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21,23). What the lord of those servants used as yardstick for reward was their faithfulness, not necessarily the physical scope or apparent degree of success in the eyes of people. “Then there arose a question between some of John’s disciples and the Jews about purifying” (John 3:25). Judging from the sequel of John’s disciples’ complaint to him about Christ’s growing popularity, it does seem that the controversy here centred around the superiority of baptism between that of Christ and John. Such an argument was uncalled for since the one baptism was a necessary preparation for the other, and both complemented each other in much the same way the foundation of a house and the super-structure do. Arguments over religious issues are often about superiority of one sect or religion over another. Such arguments are sterile and in the end benefit neither of the contending parties. Although we are to contend for the faith, we must avoid wasting precious time on “foolish and unlearned questions… knowing that they do gender strifes…” (2 Timothy 2:23,24). John’s disciples came to him with a complaint of Christ’s growing popularity, which was a manifestation of lack of basic understanding regarding the ministry of the Baptist and the baptism they themselves had received. They spoke as if it was a sign of ingratitude on the part of Christ to have entered into a ministry which was an exclusive preserve of John the Baptist. Their ignorance consisted in not knowing that the voluntary condescension of Christ to be baptized by John was to fulfil all righteousness. It is wrong to view the “greater” success and the “more excellent” gifts manifested by other believers as an indication of our own inferiority. John the Baptist's response to their concern revealed a mind-frame showing that the very thing they resented was his prayer and desire. “Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him” (verse 28); “whose shoes I am not worthy to bear…” (Matthew 3:11). He cheerfully transferred all his interest in the gospel project to the glory of Christ. He totally rejected any thought of rivalry between himself and the Lord. “John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven” (verse 27). In other words, no man is capable of appropriating any real honour to himself. John further stated his submission to Christ’s supremacy by comparing himself to the friend of the bridegroom whose only interest and joy is to see the bride joined to the bridegroom. “He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease” (verse 30). He spoke of Christ’s increase as affording him greater joy. True saints must desire constantly that Christ be seen and glorified in their lives and ministries to the extinction of their selfish cravings. To further distance himself from any comparison or rivalry with Christ, John reflected on the distinctives of Christ. “He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all” (verse 31). This testimony speaks of the divinity of Christ. It confirms His sovereign authority. He is above all persons and all things. His honour and glory defy any human expression. Concerning the certainty of the truth and purity of Christ’s doctrine, John affirmed that their incomparable superiority was guaranteed by the unmeasured fullness of the Spirit in Christ. Christ’s words were the direct revelation of the mind of God and should therefore, be of the highest interest and concern to all people. “He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true” (verse 33). The implication of this is that by receiving Christ, a person confirms his or her belief in the faithfulness and truthfulness of God to keep His promises. Those who believe in Christ will be honoured with everlasting life. On the contrary, those who reject Him make God a liar and heap on themselves eternal damnation. They thereby wilfully condemn themselves to the horror of eternal punishment, which divine justice demands. Everyone is urged to believe in Christ and escape the wrath to come.

**Questions for review**:

1. What example does Christ’s attitude towards Nicodemus portray before gospel minister?

2. Who were the Pharisees and how was their lifestyle?

3. What do you understand by heart regeneration, and how can it be received?

4. What was the effect of Christ’s message on Nicodemus?

5. What is the danger of being religious without the new birth?

6. In what ways can Christ be glorified in our lives?

7. What does John’s confession teach true believers and ministers?