

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 5

CONVERSATION STARTER

If you suddenly found yourself lost in the wilderness, what three objects would you want to have with you, and why?

A NEW HEART AND SPIRIT

Ezekiel 36:22-38

Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be born of **water and the Spirit** in order to enter the Kingdom of God. To understand what Jesus is talking about, we turn to the Prophet Ezekiel. Read Ezekiel 36:22-38 together as a group. In this passage, God says that a day is coming where He's going to do a new work in His people. First, God is going to sprinkle clean water on them. **Water** played a key role in the ceremony of purification, making a person ritually clean. It was a way of symbolically removing any association that person had with death. After all, God is the God of life.

Next, God says He is going to give the people a new heart and a new spirit. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was the center of our emotions, intellect, desires, and decision-making. So, by giving them a new heart, God is essentially reshaping the way they experience and perceive the world. And God's going to do this by putting His own **Spirit** within them. No longer will they have to rely on their own ability to follow God's law. Instead, God is going to live inside His people as he reshapes them from the inside out.

As followers of Jesus, this is God's promise for us today: **The same Spirit that partnered with God to create the world now lives in us, recreating and reshaping us from the inside out through the transformation of our hearts.** This is good news! We don't have to get it right on our own, God comes to be with us in the midst of our messiness, to help us become more like Jesus. Spend a few moments with your group discussing this truth. How do you see evidence of God shaping you today? How does it change your perspective to think about God's personal Spirit dwelling within us?

In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus points to a strange story from Numbers 21. In the book of Numbers, we read how God's people continue to rebel time and time again, even though God rescued them from slavery and provided for their every need in the desert. The people spent an entire year with God at Mount Sinai, yet they still grumble against God, wondering why God brought them into the wilderness to die. So God acts.

The story says, "God sent fiery serpents [venemous snakes] among the people." These snakes bit the people, and many died as a result. But, in Hebrew, it doesn't actually say God *sent* the snakes to bite the people, but that God simply *set them free*. In other words, God pulls back the protection of His hand and leaves the people to face the consequences of their own rebellion. Moses intercedes for the people, and God then provides a way for them to live. Those bitten by the snake can gaze upon a bronze serpent lifted high on a pole, and they will be healed.

As Jesus shares with Nicodemus, this story ultimately points forward to the moment Jesus will be lifted up on a pole when he is crucified. And those who gaze upon the cross, who *see* it for what it is, are healed from their own snake-bitten realities. This is why the Gospel is called good news! "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. Who or what has formed you as a person? What would you credit with having the biggest influence on who you are becoming today?
3. In Ezekiel 36:22-24, God tells Israel that they have failed to uphold His name among the nations. In other words, the way they live misrepresented God to the world. Instead of justice, God's people exploited the poor. Instead of putting God first, God's people worshiped idols. In what ways do you see the church misrepresenting the character of God to the world today? What about you personally? How have you misrepresented God to the world?
4. In the same way the Israelites looked at the bronze serpent to be healed, we are to look at Jesus, lifted high on the cross for our sins in order to receive our healing. How does that work in your life? What does it look like to fix your gaze upon Jesus?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

All of us are snake-bitten in one way or another. Either we've rebelled against God, or chosen to strike out on our own instead of following God's will for our lives. As Jesus says in John 3:19, there are times

when we love the darkness and avoid the vulnerability and exposure the light brings. But the longer we spend in darkness, the more painful venturing out into the light will be for us. This week, spend some time asking God to shine light on the dark areas of your life. As a guide, consider using this timeless prayer from Psalm 139:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!”