

Lesson: Helping Others Find Christ: Jesus and Nicodemus

Biblical Passage

John 3:1-21

Supporting Passage

1 Peter 1:23-25; 1 John 4:7-12, 5:1-5

Memory Verse

John 3:16

Biblical Truth

Heaven and eternal life come only through new birth by God's Spirit.

Context

After His miracle at the wedding in Cana, Jesus met a Jewish leader named Nicodemus. This learned man came to Jesus at night, seeking answers about the Kingdom of God. In His time with Nicodemus, Jesus proclaimed for the first time the necessity of being "born again" through faith in order to experience eternal life.

Investigation

Seeking answers about the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. At this time, Jesus emphasized the necessity of being born again through faith in order to experience eternal life. The words Jesus spoke to a first-century Pharisee are as important to seekers of God today as they were to Nicodemus himself. This passage is so significant that it includes one of the best-known verses in all of Scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . ." (John 3:16).

Importance

This passage teaches that *Salvation is by Faith Alone*. It is important because Jesus Himself emphasized the necessity of being born again through faith in order to experience eternal life. He said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3, see also John 3:5). Jesus stressed that the way to eternal life is only through Himself, saying, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Belief in Jesus Christ is the only way to achieve salvation. Salvation is indeed by faith in God's Son alone.

Other key truths in this lesson include *Jesus is God and Savior* and *People are God's Treasure*.

Interpretation

John 3:1-3 Nicodemus was an important man in his day. He had a high-society job as a member of the *Sanhedrin*, a reputation as a well-known teacher, and served as a member of the *Pharisees*. After Jesus' death, Nicodemus provided "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds" for the anointing of Jesus' body (John 19:39). Only the wealthy could afford to do this.

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? He might have been trying to avoid the embarrassment caused by what other Pharisees would think. It could have been that the night would better fit his schedule and purpose since there would be less chance for interruption. At any rate, some scholars believe the darkness is symbolic of Nicodemus' lack of understanding about God (vv. 19-21). Upon arrival, he began by calling Jesus "*Rabbi*" or "*Teacher*." This demonstrated great respect for Jesus, even though Jesus had never been formally trained (John 7:15). Yet this compliment fell far short of capturing His true identity.

Jesus immediately addressed Nicodemus' spiritual problem. All of Nicodemus' accomplishments could not make him right with God. Jesus explained that to enter God's Kingdom, a person must be "born *again*." All of the religious status Nicodemus had worked to acquire could not earn him eternal life. He must be spiritually reborn through God's grace into the Kingdom of God (Romans 6:23).

John 3:4-5 Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus' response. Since he thought Jesus was talking about physical rebirth, Jesus restated and clarified His answer. Some have taken Jesus' words, "born of water," to indicate the priority of baptism in the salvation experience. While baptism is important, it is more likely that Jesus used water to refer to physical birth.

John 3:6-8 Jesus explained the need for new birth using two illustrations. During physical birth, a newborn becomes part of an earthly family. During spiritual birth from above, a person becomes a member of God's family. Adam's sin was passed down to us by birth and gives us a sinful nature (1 Corinthians 15:22). Fallen people can therefore only give birth to fallen people. Likewise, only the Holy *Spirit* can give spiritual life to our souls. One must be born again (from above) to become part of God's family.

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The second illustration helped Nicodemus understand the Spirit by way of the wind. The use of the word *pneuma* is a play on words, for it can mean both spirit and wind. Like the wind, the Spirit cannot be seen or manipulated, yet it is identified by the effects it brings.

John 3:9–11 Since Jesus refers to Nicodemus as Israel's teacher, it seems that this Pharisee must have enjoyed elite status among the rabbis of his day. But his study of the Scriptures should have taught him God's ability to change human lives. He should have known from God's Word that only God gives a person a new heart and a right spirit (Ezekiel 36:25–27). Nicodemus, the earthly teacher, did not understand Jesus' message. The conversation demonstrated that Jesus is the only true Teacher who can explain the deep mysteries of God.

When Jesus used the plural pronoun *we*, He was probably referring to Himself and His disciples, who had received His instructions. When He used the plural pronoun *you*, He was probably referring to Nicodemus and the other Pharisees who had ignored Jesus' spiritual teaching.

John 3:12–15 Nicodemus had difficulty in understanding Jesus' teaching on the new birth. To explain this concept to him, Jesus used two earthly analogies: physical birth and the wind. But how was Nicodemus going to understand the deep things of God, such as the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, if he could not understand the basics?

Jesus reminded Nicodemus of a familiar Old Testament story. In the Book of Numbers, God sent a plague of fiery serpents on the disobedient Israelites during the exodus. Their poisonous bites resulted in many deaths. Moses brought the people's contrite confession to God, and God provided a divine antidote: God told Moses to set a bronze serpent atop a pole in the camp. Whoever looked at the bronze serpent would live (Numbers 21:5–9). In the same way, Christ would be lifted up on the cross. Whoever looked to Him would gain spiritual life. All humankind has been bitten and poisoned by deadly sin—but those who look to Jesus by faith are given eternal life (Romans 6:23).

John 3:16 This verse is often called the gospel in a nutshell. In one sentence, John summed up God's plan for saving humanity. This verse reveals Christ as the source of eternal life. This eternal life comes through faith in Jesus, and it describes more than just duration of existence. It is also the quality of life in Christ. People have only two options: believe in Jesus or perish. Perishing is the opposite of gaining eternal life in Christ. Those who perish completely fail to fulfill God's purpose for life. As a result, they are excluded from His fellowship forever. This offer of eternal life is made to the entire world. No one is turned down based on race or culture or any earthly circumstance. The only requirement is faith in Jesus.

John 3:17–21 Humanity is God's treasure. God displayed His love for His treasure by sending Jesus—not to condemn this sinful world, but to be a sacrifice for its sins. Condemnation comes not by a lack of love or effort on God's part, but by a lack of faith on the part of the unbeliever.

The difference between belief and unbelief does not lie in guilt or innocence. It is in the attitude individuals take toward light. Unbelievers avoid the light because it exposes their sin. Believers bask in the light and enjoy fellowship with Jesus and with each other (1 John 1:5–9).

Implications

Because of the popularity of religious tolerance, it is easy to be confused about the biblical concept of eternal life. People often believe that being raised in a Christian family will automatically earn them eternal life. But God's Word is clear: Salvation is by Faith Alone. There are not different ways to eternal life; there is only one—Jesus Christ. That truth does not sit well with people who argue that God will honor any honest attempt to obtain eternal life.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a religious leader more concerned about being true to his religion than to God. We must make sure we never promote our religion, denominations, or churches more than God. Our responsibility is to promote God's glory through the way we live our lives. Authentic faith can only be discovered through accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Like Nicodemus, people today cannot experience God because they are so religious. Knowing about God and knowing God are not the same. Nicodemus knew about God until he met Jesus. In our culture, we must make sure we never substitute the study of God for experiencing God. That is the lesson Nicodemus learned as well as the end result of his encounter with Christ. To lead religious people to a saving knowledge of God requires that we first explain the futility of a legalistic approach to faith and then the joy of a love-based relationship with God.

How can we know that we are born again?

Why do some people not see the importance of being born again?

- What does it mean to have faith?
- John 3:16 is the most popular verse in the Bible. What is the most significant truth contained in this verse?