



# The Gospel of John

## Session Six: Nicodemus and the New Birth

### THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

In chapters 3-4, John the apostle writes three narratives in quick succession of people who are impacted by the good news of Jesus. Today, we will examine Nicodemus. Jesus taught him that through Christ, God's love and forgiveness would extend from the Jews to the rest of the world.

In chapter 4, we will look at Jesus's encounter with a Samaritan woman, and finally, a healing performed at the request of a royal official, who was likely a Gentile.

In these chapters we see the good news of the kingdom of God expanding from the Jews to the Samaritans, to the Gentiles. John's storytelling in this order can't help but make us mindful of Christ's final instructions to His disciples: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8).

### TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

*John 3:1-21*

### THE MAIN IDEA

Jesus invites us to step out of the darkness and into the light of new life found in Him.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

*What leads us to try and keep parts of our lives in the dark? What would you need to believe about Jesus to open your life to Him completely?*

### SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

**John 3:1-9** Nicodemus, a Pharisee and synagogue leader, came to Jesus one evening. Their conversation was recorded in one of the most well-known passages of Scripture. Jesus's words to Nicodemus are true for all—new birth is required to enter the kingdom of God.

**John 3:10-15** Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert for the healing of the Israelites. In the same way, Jesus said the Son of Man would be lifted up for the forgiveness of sins and healing of hearts. New birth into the kingdom of God is received by faith in Christ.

**John 3:16-21** God loved the world in this way—He sent His Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty of sin and be reconciled to God. New birth means reconciliation with God and brings us out of darkness and into His eternal light.



## START HERE

Nicodemus may have come to Jesus in the dark of night, unsure about the wisdom of seeking out the teacher, or in fear of being discovered by others. However, after this encounter, we see Nicodemus show up twice more in John's Gospel. Nicodemus appeared again in John 7:45-52 where he questioned the wisdom of judging Jesus without hearing from Him. Finally, he was there the night of the crucifixion and joined Joseph of Arimathea in taking custody of and preparing the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:38-42). While Nicodemus may have first spoken to Jesus in darkness, this led to him stepping into the light.

## DISCUSS

*Reflect on a moment when the light of Jesus shone into a dark area of your life. What did that experience show you about God? About yourself?*

## REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

### 1. New birth is required.

*John 3:1-9: There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to him at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him."*

*Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

*"How can anyone be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked him. "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"*

*Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

*"How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus.*

#### *Unpacking John 3:1-8*

Imagine you awake in the middle of night, looking for a cool glass of water or a midnight snack. Not wanting to wake your family, you tiptoe down the hall, feet shuffling with uncertainty along the floor. Moving through the living room and into the kitchen, you stumble along, trying not to stub a toe on a sofa or the kitchen table. It's not that you don't know your way around the house, it's that you are in darkness. You can't see what's right in front of you. You don't need a better floorplan or softer furniture—you need light to see clearly.



Nicodemus, a Pharisee and synagogue leader, came to visit Jesus one evening, under cloak of darkness. Perhaps he feared being seen by people in the community, or even the other religious leaders of the day. Spending time with a radical new leader could have spelled trouble for him, personally or positionally, so Nicodemus approached the Lord in the evening. It is interesting to note Nicodemus didn't begin with a question, rather he made a statement: *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him"* (v. 2).

Nicodemus had plenty of knowledge about God's Word. He had no shortage of information. Pharisees were the strictest of the two religious groups of the day, and as a synagogue leader, Nicodemus would have studied for many years and committed large portions of the Torah to memory. He understood the prophecies concerning the Messiah, and witnessing Jesus's miracles sparked his curiosity. He believed Jesus's ability to perform miracles had come from God, and he wanted to know more. Still, he felt the need to come to Jesus alone and at night.

In verse 3, Jesus responded to Nicodemus's statement with one of His own. *Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Depending on what translation you use, you might notice an asterisk after the phrase "born again." A note may tell you a more accurate translation is "born from above." The Jewish people could trace their ancestral tribes all the way back to Jacob, whom God later renamed Israel, and his twelve sons. In Genesis 28:13-15, God promised to give Israel land, and descendants to cover it. He would make them into a holy nation. Belonging to a tribe of Israel was how you belonged to the kingdom of God. Yet here, Jesus said that kingdom citizens are not born through the family tree of Jacob but from above.

In response, Nicodemus asked his first questions: *"How can anyone be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"* (v. 4). Jesus spoke of spiritual birth, and Nicodemus spoke of physical birth. He could not yet understand the re-birth Jesus described. It's easy for us to approach passages like this one and judge Bible characters for not "getting it." It's important = to remember that as believers, we have the Holy Spirit living inside of us. God's Spirit guides and speaks to us (John 16:13). In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul wrote, *"The person without the Spirit does not receive what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually."* Lest we are too harsh on Nicodemus, or others in our lives who do not understand spiritual things or appear to walk in spiritual darkness, it is good to remember it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability to hear and receive truth. At some point for every Christian, God's Spirit opened our spiritual eyes so we could see and respond to the good news of Jesus. As we think about people with whom we want to share the gospel, we can pray God will open their spiritual eyes to the truth of His Word (Psalm 119:18).

*"Jesus answered, 'Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again'"* (John 3:5-6).



Theologians debate what exactly Jesus meant by born of “water and Spirit.” Some claim Jesus spoke of John the Baptist’s water baptism, which you might recall was a baptism of repentance. They feel Jesus meant someone must repent (water) and receive the Holy Spirit to be born again. Others say Jesus was referring to Christian baptism. However, that concept had not yet originated and would have no meaning for Nicodemus. Still others hypothesize Jesus was referring to natural birth (and the birth “waters”) as the first birth, and salvation as the second birth. These options leave the reader with the same questions as Nicodemus: What does it mean?

Recall that Nicodemus was an Old Testament scholar. He spent many hours a week studying and memorizing the Torah. He would have been very familiar with Old Testament references of cleansing water used as a symbol of faith and repentance. God used the Great Flood as a cleansing of sin and its impact on the world (Genesis 6–9). Naaman was asked to wash seven times in the Jordan River to be cleansed of his leprosy (2 Kings 5). And Old Testament priests were instructed to be spiritually and physically cleansed before they approached the altar (Exodus 30:18-31). In Ezekiel 36:25-27, the prophet speaks of God’s desire to cleanse the people from their sins as with water, so that He could give them a renewed heart and Spirit: *“I will also sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances.”* Jesus’s teaching on “water and Spirit” possibly recalled Ezekiel’s words—a reference familiar to Nicodemus. The time of God’s promise to the Old Testament prophet had arrived.

*“Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again”* (v. 7). Nicodemus, a Rabbi, Pharisee, and synagogue leader “must” be born again? No pedigree, church attendance, or family line will get us into heaven. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. Even with his credentials, Nicodemus must be born again to receive the Spirit. Then, in the next breath, Jesus declared that the Spirit blew where He pleased. The kingdom of God would not be contained to the lineage of Jacob. Just as Naaman, the Syrian officer, was cleansed in the River Jordan, a rite reserved for Israelites, the cleansing and purifying of the Spirit would not be limited to the Jews. Jesus’s description of the movement of the Spirit set the stage for a picture of God’s love that would reach the entire world.

As Paul wrote in Titus 3:5, *“. . . he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”* We cannot enter the kingdom of God through any other door. We cannot enter by status, ancestry, or effort. We enter the kingdom of the Father, paid for by the Son, through the Holy Spirit. Like Nicodemus, and every other person alive then and today, new birth is required—and Jesus was about to tell Nicodemus how this was possible.



## DISCUSS

- *Think of your life before Christ. How is stumbling around in a dark house a fitting metaphor for that time? Is there another illustration you might use?*
- *Where do you see yourself relying on performance, background, or reputation instead of the new birth Christ offers? How can you begin or renew dependence on Him?*

## 2. New birth is received by faith.

John 3:10-15: *“Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Jesus replied. “Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man.*

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”*

### *Unpacking John 3:9-15*

Imagine again you’re at home in the middle of the night and still want that cool drink of water or snack. This time, instead of stumbling in the dark, you grab a small flashlight to illuminate the path before you. The obstacles—chair, sofa, kitchen table—are still there. However, now the path to get around them becomes clear. When we turn on a light, even a small one, it lights up the path ahead. When we come to Christ, it is like turning on a light inside our soul. The obstacles and difficulties are still there, but in Him we find salvation as well as clarity for navigating life.

Nicodemus struggled to understand how such a radical transformation could take place. Jesus patiently shifted Nicodemus’s focus away from human effort to God’s gracious provision, showing new birth is not something we do, but something we receive through faith.

*“Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Jesus replied. “Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man” (vv. 10-13).*

Jesus’s question to Nicodemus was not accusatory, but revelatory. The Pharisees and Sadducees should have been among the first to recognize the Messiah. They certainly had studied enough to know what God said to the Old Testament prophets about Him. However, their pride overshadowed what must be received by faith. A person’s religious education does not matter in light of eternity. What matters is faith in Christ. God has chosen people from all walks of life, including those the world might reject, to receive His salvation.



In 1 Corinthians 1:27-31 Paul wrote: *“Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence. It is from him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption—in order that, as it is written: **Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.**”*

In Christ, the educated Pharisee, the Gentile, and even the little children all come on equal footing. No one will be able to boast in the Lord’s presence about what he or she brings to the table. We all come to Christ impoverished and in need of a Savior. Jesus pointed out Nicodemus’s own insufficiency. His education would not get him to heaven. Yet, there would be many uneducated and discarded people who would inherit eternal life.

New birth is received by faith in the One who lights the way (John 8:12) but also by the One who *is* the way (John 14:6). Jesus pointed Nicodemus to a vital truth—the healing of new life is only found in Christ. *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life”* (v. 14). In Numbers 21, the Israelites were in the middle of the forty years of wandering in the desert before they reached the promised land. The journey was long, and the people grew impatient, grumbling against the Lord. God sent venomous snakes that bit the people, and many Israelites died. When they repented, and Moses plead to the Lord on their behalf, He told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. He held it up and when the people looked at it, they were healed. (Interestingly, the common symbol for the medical profession, the Rod of Asclepius, is derived from this biblical story).

Jesus is the true healer, offering salvation for all who look to Him. Just as the Israelites couldn’t heal themselves from the venomous snake bite, we cannot heal ourselves from the effects of sin. As Acts 4:12 says, *“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved.”* We must look to the cross of Jesus, lifted up as the perfect sacrifice for sin, to receive spiritual healing and eternal life. This act of faith is where salvation begins. As A.W. Tozer wrote, *“Faith is the gaze of the soul upon a saving God.”*

Through Christ, salvation is made available to the world. John communicated this in John 1:12: *“But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name.”* In this late-night rendezvous with Nicodemus, Jesus expressed the same thing. Salvation began with the Jews, but through Christ, it is extended to all who put their faith in Him.



## DISCUSS

- *Why is the symbol of the bronze serpent a fitting connection to Jesus on the cross?*
- *Beyond the moment of salvation, we are to fix our eyes on Christ every day. What does it mean for you to “look to Jesus” in your daily life?*

### 3. New birth brings us into the light.

John 3:16-21: *“For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed. But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.”*

#### *Unpacking John 3:16-21*

Thinking back on our previous illustration, rather than walking around a dark house with a flashlight, imagine you step outside in the morning light. Nothing is hidden! You can see clearly where to go, and you can walk confidently in the light. In full light, you can see and avoid obstacles and get where going without issue. When we come to faith in Christ, it is as if we begin to move through the world in technicolor. The light of Jesus, and the good news of the gospel light up the dark places of our lives. In Christ, we are freed from the guilt and shame of our past sin, cleansed by the Holy Spirit, and set free to walk in the light of Christ.

*“For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life”* (v. 16). If you learned one Bible verse as a child in Sunday School, it was likely John 3:16. The person who first shared the gospel with you may have referenced this verse. John 3:16 has been emblazoned on T-shirts and coffee cups, and athletes have inscribed it on eye black. This may be the most well-known verse in the Bible. However, don't let your familiarity with this verse make you rush past its spiritual significance.

God's love is not a taking love, a punitive, or a manipulative love. It is a giving love. He gave His son, whom He loves, to rescue a sinful people, whom He loves. If you have ever been tempted to think that God will love you when you do certain things, when you “get your life together,” or when you stop sinning, let these words encourage you. Romans 5:8 says, *“But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* He did not give His Son once we became worthy of His love. As sinful people, we will never be worthy of His love. God's love prompted Him to give, and we are the unworthy recipients of His lovingkindness.



God's love is a pursuing love, and through Jesus' sacrifice it is a saving love. Humanity is the object of God's love and eternity with God in heaven is the eternal destination of His love. God's love is freely given. Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches, *"For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast."* God's gift of salvation is free, but it is not automatic. John 3:16 is clear that eternal life is the gift of God's love, poured out through the sacrifice of Christ, on everyone who believes. Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* We must each, by faith, step into the light of Christ's love.

*"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"* (v. 17). Verses 16 and 17 are best read and understood together. God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn the world. Rather, Jesus came to save. And the object of this love is the whole world. The good news of the gospel is for the Jews and Gentiles alike. Not all will believe in Christ, but all are offered salvation in Him. This is not because of works or adherence to the law, but because we are the recipients of His love.

Acceptance by God is based on belief in Christ alone. There would be many Jews who would not accept Christ. There would be many Gentiles who would receive Him. In the kingdom of God ethnicity counts for nothing—believing faith in Christ is what saves. Christ says the person who does not believe is condemned, not by God but by the weight of his or her own sin. When we are exposed to the light of Christ, we have a responsibility to respond (John 9:41).

This passage concludes by contrasting two different types of people; those who step into the light and those who continue to live in spiritual darkness. The Jews had long divided God's love and salvation along different lines—those who were Jewish versus those who were not, or those who kept the law against those who did not keep the law. However, in the kingdom there are only two options: those who are born again in Christ and walk in His light and those who do not. In Christ, the dividing wall between God and man is torn down, the gospel brings light and truth into the dark places of humanity. God so loved the world, that all are invited to step into His light.

## DISCUSS

- *Who first told you the good news about Jesus? How did the gospel bring light into your life?*
- *Reflect on this truth: "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him." How does that encourage us to tell others about Jesus?*
- *At times, we are tempted to stay in the dark, because stepping into God's light feels scary. What promise does this passage give us about all who allow Jesus into the dark places of our lives?*



---

## DEEPER FOCUS

### REFLECT ON THE TEXT

### DISCUSS

- *This passage is so well-known that many could recite sizable portions of it. What stood out to you today in a new way?*

### RESPOND TO THE TEXT

The world God loves includes you. What does it mean to think that God loves you enough to send Jesus? How could that knowledge impact the way you lead your family, in your workplace, or impact your beliefs about others?

### APPLY

*Think about why Nicodemus came to speak to Jesus in the dark, and what benefit it may have provided for honest conversation. Reflect on a moment when the light of Jesus shone into a dark area of your life. What did that experience show you about God? About yourself?*

### REFERENCES

A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Bethany House, 1948.