

SESSION 5

Everyone Who Believes

Jesus offers eternal life to all who believe in Him.

JOHN 3:4-18

MEMORY VERSE: JOHN 3:16

FIRST THOUGHTS

A new year represents a fresh start. This is the day we start that new diet; the day we begin to finish that project; the day we take that first step toward completing a 5k run without walking. This is a new year with no history or regrets. Jesus told Nicodemus that his life could be characterized by newness if he would believe in Him.

(In PSG, p. 46) **What do you most look forward to with the start of a new year?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JOHN 3:1-36

John 3 is one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament, primarily because it contains the gospel in a sentence (John 3:16). Similarly, most believers know something about Nicodemus and his nighttime discussion with Jesus. Unfortunately, familiarity can lead readers to overlook details of this encounter, limiting their comprehension of important truths.

Coming to see Jesus secretly, Nicodemus thought he was offering a compliment by acknowledging that Jesus was acting under God's direction. Having a member of the Sanhedrin authenticate His ministry would have impressed a lot of people, but Jesus needed no human affirmation. Instead, He focused on Nicodemus's need for a new relationship with God.

Jesus had a way of turning statements back on the speaker, and He used the phrase "born again" to examine the deeper truths. With almost childlike concreteness, Nicodemus interpreted "born again" as a physical experience. Jesus guided His guest gently into realms of the spiritual.

As they talked, Jesus addressed several vital principles. First, humans must experience a spiritual birth if they want to enter God's kingdom. Second, faith in Jesus is the only way people can undergo such a transformation. Third, without being born again, each person remains condemned. Finally, Jesus came so everyone who believes in Him might be saved. Sadly, many people prefer to remain in darkness and condemnation rather than repent, believe, and be saved.

The scene suddenly changed in the second half of chapter 3, but the theme remained the same as Jesus and His disciples moved into the Judean countryside. John the Baptist's disciples were concerned that more people were following Jesus than John. Rather than being threatened, John explained that his preaching prepared the way for Jesus, the true Messiah. John understood that Jesus was the real subject of his sermons.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BORN AGAIN? (JOHN 3:4-8)

Verse 4

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Nicodemus probably thought he had offered Jesus quite a tribute (vv. 1-3). First, as a member of the ruling Sanhedrin, he came to Jesus rather than summoning this itinerant rabbi to see him. Although he approached at night when few would see his actions, the fact Nicodemus came at all was significant. Second, he associated Jesus’s miracles with God’s work.

Rather than accept Nicodemus’s statement at face value, Jesus drew him into deeper theological waters. He replied that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again (v. 3). The phrase “born again” was unfamiliar to the Jewish leader. All Nicodemus understood was the Mosaic law, obedience, and sacrifice, and none of that involved being born again. The concept of transformational change was alien to him.

Like a child confused by abstract concepts, Nicodemus imagined a person being born again physically. He asked, “*How can someone be born when they are old?*” The term *old* does not indicate elderly, but refers to an adult. The mental image of a grown person entering *his mother’s womb* for a second time was incredulous. The way his inquiry was worded suggests that he expected a negative response.

Verses 5-7

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

Using *very truly* for emphasis, Jesus differentiated between being *born of water* and being born of *the Spirit*. Both are required if someone desires the kingdom of God. Many people identify *born of water* with physical birth. Others see it as representing the Word of God. Another point of view combines water and Spirit resulting in “spiritual water,” perhaps thinking of Old Testament symbolic cleansings. Advocates say these refer to sacrificial blood, which pointed to the atonement of Christ (Ezek. 36:25). Some faith traditions believe that Jesus was saying that water baptism is required for one’s salvation.

Addressing “born again,” some scholars note Jesus’s contrast to physical birth versus spiritual birth. Other commentators argue against this notion. However, Nicodemus thought Jesus was talking about being physically born a second time. Therefore, it seems likely that Jesus used water to mean physical birth.

Entering God’s kingdom requires a rebirth of *the Spirit*. Jesus identified two important applications. First, the source of this new birth is God’s Spirit. Second, the nature of new birth is spiritual. The inner aspect of human nature—the spirit—must be transformed by being made alive through the Spirit of God.

In most of his Gospel, John referred to salvation in terms of eternal life. In this passage, he used a phrase more often used in the other Gospels: *the kingdom of God*. Nicodemus had some knowledge of God’s kingdom, but he equated it with the nation of Israel. Jesus always used the *kingdom of God* to mean the reign of God in all areas. Not only was Nicodemus not yet a part of God’s kingdom, but he could not *enter* without this new birth.

Repetition for clarity and emphasis was a common technique in Hebrew teaching. Jesus reinforced His previous statement by reiterating it. If something were to give *birth to flesh*, it would be simply *flesh*. However, the kingdom of God requires more than a biological legacy. Simply being born a Jew was not enough. Since God’s kingdom is spiritual, it requires that one be born of the *Spirit*. In this, Jesus again emphasized the Source and nature of this new birth. God’s kingdom requires spiritual regeneration.

Jesus mildly rebuked Nicodemus for being *surprised* at His use of *born again*. *Surprised* connotes astonishment at something beyond the normal scope of experience. Nicodemus was hearing something from this untrained rabbi that was outside his theological training. The concept and its Source astonished him.

The Greek for *again* can also mean “from above.” So, the idea of being born of the *Spirit* falls more in line with being born “from above.” However, since Jesus and Nicodemus were conversing in Aramaic, the nuances of Greek may not have been quite evident. Jesus’s subsequent explanation clarified His intention.

Verse 8

⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Jesus often used common phenomena to illustrate uncommon spiritual truth. Here, He used the wind to help Nicodemus comprehend His meaning. The *wind blows wherever it pleases*. No one can control the course of the wind, and human intellect could not determine *where it comes from or where it is going*.

Jesus was not offering scientific evidence. Instead, He was employing a common experience to describe how the Spirit works. The phrase *so it is* connected a natural phenomenon with *everyone born of the Spirit*. One might not be able to determine where, when, or how the Holy Spirit accomplishes His work, but evidence of the result abounds.

Believers must help others understand the truth about salvation. No one can enter God’s kingdom by human effort or natural means. God’s Spirit moves within the human spirit to convince us that we are sinners. As we respond in repentance and faith, we can be born again.

(In PSG, p. 50) **What do people find confusing about salvation coming through faith in Jesus alone?**

HOW? (JOHN 3:9-13)

Verses 9-10

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?

Even intelligent people can struggle to comprehend spiritual truths. When they focus on secular approaches, they cannot understand the sacred. Nicodemus was trying to use human reason to respond to Jesus’s teaching. When he asked *“How can this be?”* he betrayed his human perspective. He tried to reconcile what he was hearing with the natural order of his physical world. He was concerned with logistical possibilities rather than God’s supernatural work.

In response, Jesus questioned Nicodemus’s understanding of the Old Testament and his spiritual discernment. Nicodemus used the title “Rabbi” in verse 2 and proceeded to describe Jesus as a teacher who had come from God. Jesus turned that thought back to Nicodemus and asked how he could be *Israel’s teacher* and not understand the new birth.

As a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus should have possessed superior insight into Scripture. The Greek text includes a definite article with the word *teacher*. Jesus was stating that Nicodemus was “the teacher” of Israel, instead of just “a teacher.” This combination emphasizes Nicodemus’s reputation as a scholar, yet Jesus challenged him for not comprehending spiritual transformation. A prominent authority like Nicodemus should *understand these things*.

Verses 11-13

¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you

believe if I speak of heavenly things?¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Jesus employed words like *very truly* and *I tell you* to call attention to His statements. In this paragraph, Jesus switched back and forth from the singular to the plural references, and scholars suggest several reasons for this approach. One possibility involves a collective, or literary, plural even though the speaker refers only to himself. Others suggest one or more of Jesus's disciples may have been present, perhaps John. The *we* statements could not have included Nicodemus because at this point he did *not accept our testimony*. His conversion and commitment to Jesus came later.

Jesus drew a contrast between uneducated, but spiritually discerning, people and those who are religiously educated but spiritually ignorant. The former would *speak* and *testify* to what they knew firsthand, and their testimony would be valid because it was based on personal experience with God. Unlike the scribes, Jesus taught with authenticity and authority (Mark 1:22).

The verb *accept* also takes the plural form. Nicodemus represented a host of Jewish leaders who did not embrace Jesus or His words. The term connotes taking possession or receiving something. They heard but did not understand because they refused to acknowledge Jesus's legitimacy. *Testimony* also can be translated "witness" and emphasizes the source of truth. The phrase *our testimony* points back to the persons who spoke and testified to what they had witnessed and experienced.

Returning to the singular *I*, Jesus questioned whether Nicodemus would understand even if the Master explained it further. If Nicodemus and other leaders could not accept *earthly things*, they would never *believe* what Jesus told them about *heavenly things*. With this term, Jesus addressed realities related to God's kingdom. Faith and understanding are both necessary, but neither were apparent in Nicodemus's responses.

Some writers question what parts of this passage constitute Jesus's conversation and which verses, if any, reflect John's commentary. By going back and forth between first person and second person, the passage evidently included the conversation itself. Arguments have been made that John's commentary may have begun after verse 12.

However, if verse 13 and following represent the continuing conversation, Jesus used one of His favorite forms of self-address—the *Son of Man*—to describe Himself as the Messiah who *came from heaven* in human form. As the *Son of Man*, He could represent humanity in an atoning sacrifice. Also, by sharing the human experience, He could intercede for humans before the throne of God (Heb. 4:15).

Believers can have confidence that Jesus is the Messiah. He understands us because He created us and lived as one of us. The nature of Christ as fully divine and fully human strains our comprehension. We may struggle to explain it, but we must believe it.

(In PSG, p. 51) **How do a person's questions about Jesus reveal what they trust for truth?**

BELIEVE (JOHN 3:14-18)

Verses 14-15

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Since Nicodemus was still operating with an Old Testament perspective, Jesus reached into Moses's writings to illustrate how the path to eternal life flows through faith. In Numbers 21, many rebellious Israelites were bitten by deadly snakes in the *wilderness*. Following God's instructions, Moses made a bronze *snake* and *lifted* it on a pole. There was nothing magical about the snake. God simply promised to heal anyone who looked at it. The snake did not heal the people. God healed the people who obeyed based on their faith in His word.

Jesus told Nicodemus that the *Son of Man* would also be *lifted up*. The phrase *lifted up* is clear to modern believers who look back with an understanding of the cross. To Nicodemus, though, it must have been a strange, cryptic claim. Inclusion of the word *must* defines Christ's crucifixion as a necessity. Only when Jesus was lifted up on the cross could atonement for human sin be made.

The purpose of Christ's death was twofold. First, it provided atonement for sinful humanity. Second, that salvation was limited to those who believe in Him. While *everyone* implies availability to all people, *who believes* demands faithful response. Only those who look to Him with faith will receive eternal life.

Verse 16

¹⁶ For 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.

Perhaps the most familiar verse in the Bible is also the most beloved. It describes the why, what, and how of salvation. God moved because He *loved the world*. The term *world* sometimes applies to the earth. Other times it refers to the sinful worldly system. In this case, it points to the entirety of the human population. God loves everyone.

God's manner of providing eternal life was sacrificing His Son. *Gave* not only includes the cross, but the entire act of incarnation, propitiation, and salvation. This priceless gift required the lifeblood of God's Son. The phrase translated *one and only Son* has also been rendered "only begotten" (KJV). While every believer is an adopted child of God through the new birth, Jesus is unique as God's Son, equal to the Father in every way.

Faith provides the "how" of salvation. God does the work of regeneration based on faith. Again, the inclusive term *whoever* opens the door to anyone. The only qualifier is that the person *believes in him*. As a result, people who have faith in Jesus *shall not perish*.

This statement does not suggest that believers do not die, but infers freedom from spiritual death (Matt. 10:28; Rev. 20:14; 21:8). Everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior gains *eternal life* at that moment. It includes the assurance that even though we may die physically, we will be raised again by Christ. So, this quality of life involves both this world and the next.

Verses 17-18

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Jesus's ministry focused on the positive aspects of salvation. *God did not send his Son to condemn the world*. Instead, God sent the Son *to save the world*. No other option was possible. Humanity could not save itself, so God lovingly made the way by sending His Son to die in our place.

The term *whoever* affirms the comprehensive nature of salvation and condemnation. The one who is *not condemned* is the one who *believes in him*. Similarly, the one who *does not believe* stands *condemned already*. Faith in *God's one and only Son* brings the person out of condemnation and bestows the blessing of salvation. The *name of God's . . . Son* is the object of this faith. Simply believing Jesus existed is not enough. Identifying Him as God's only Son is required for salvation (1 John 3:23).

God lovingly offers salvation to all who will accept Jesus. Race, nationality, culture, past sins, religious heritage, and economic class don't matter. None of the things that commonly divide people can stand before God. He loves us so much that He sacrificed His Son so we could be saved.

(In PSG, p. 52) Why is it so important for people to understand that salvation is available to everyone who believes in Jesus?

KEY DOCTRINE

The Kingdom

The Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ. (See Luke 18:15-17; Colossians 1:13.)

BIBLE SKILL

Identify the imagery in a verse or passage and discover what it communicates.

Compare John 3 with 1 Peter 1:23 and 1 John 5:1. How does being born spiritually convey the idea of spiritual transformation? Compare this passage. How is being born of God linked to faith in Christ and love for God? How does the picture of the new birth help you grasp the relationship believers share with the Heavenly Father.