

God's Saving Love in Christ

Bible Background • [JOHN 3:1-21](#)

Printed Text • [JOHN 3:1-16](#)

Devotional Reading • [TITUS 3:1-7](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE the story of Nicodemus who learned from Jesus what it means “to be born from above”; APPRECIATE how God’s love offers salvation rather than condemnation; and SEEK to live as spiritually reborn people who know and respond to God’s love.



Jeff waited until his coworkers filed out of the break room before he approached Marcus. Marcus had been sharing his testimony, and Jeff had more questions.

“I don’t understand,” Jeff said. “It seems like everything changed when you became a Christian.”

“That’s about right. That’s what we mean when we say we’ve been born again or that we have a new life.”

Jeff hung his head. “I’d like a new life. I seem to have messed this one up pretty bad.”

“We’ve all done things we’re not proud of,” Marcus told him. “Jesus offers a fresh start if you accept Him, and He gives eternal life. You can have that today.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Let me pray for you. I want you to see the truth of God’s Word, and only the Holy Spirit can illuminate that for you. Jesus wants you to believe in Him and have everlasting life.”

Marcus prayed that the Holy Spirit would continue working in Jeff’s heart and that Jeff would continue to seek the truth.

Jesus offers new birth and eternal life to those who believe. How did you experience the new birth?

Keep in Mind

“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](#)).

KJV

[John 3:1](#) There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

3 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.

4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

16 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.

NLT

John 3:1 There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee.

2 After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

3 Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

4 “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

5 Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.

6 Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.

7 So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’

8 The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

9 “How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked.

10 Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things?”

11 I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony.

12 But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

13 No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven.

14 And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

16 For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

The People, Places, and Times

Nicodemus. A religious leader of the Pharisees and member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus was both a religious and political leader. He came to Jesus by night; one reason might be because he was afraid to let the other Pharisees know about his interest in Jesus’ teachings.

Background

Jesus encounters Nicodemus near the Passover. He had recently cleared out the Temple, which caused some commotion. The religious leaders demanded to know what authority Jesus had to do these things, and they demanded to see a sign. He told them that He would destroy this Temple and raise it again in three days. The religious leaders were furious.

At the same time, John tells us that Jesus performed many miracles during the Passover celebration and that many believed in Him because of them ([John 2:23](#)). Word about Jesus began to spread.

Among those who heard about Jesus was Nicodemus, a Pharisee very educated in the Scriptures. He comes to Jesus personally to learn from Him. He recognizes that God is empowering Jesus to perform miracles, and some of the other religious leaders do, too ([John 3:2](#)). Not everyone agreed, though. There were differing opinions about Jesus, His identity, and His power to do such mighty acts. Nicodemus decides to go to Jesus for himself.

In Depth

1. Jesus Is from God ([John 3:1–2](#))

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jews. He came to Jesus one night to speak to Him. Nicodemus had seen the miracles that Jesus had done and recognized God's work in them. Though he was usually concerned with matters of law, Nicodemus' visit indicates that he was sensitive spiritually.

The reason for the timing of Nicodemus' visit is uncertain. Some scholars suggest that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he was fearful. Others scholars have suggested that he came at night because he desired privacy, as Jesus was usually engaged in public ministry during the day. Whatever his reasoning, Nicodemus recognized that Jesus was from God, and he wanted to hear more from Jesus.

2. Born of the Spirit (vv. 3–9)

Jesus begins to teach Nicodemus. He explains that one must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was thinking only of a natural birth, but Jesus says that one must be born again, or born "from above," to enter the kingdom of God. The idea of being born again signified conversion, and Nicodemus would have seen no need for this.

This would have puzzled Nicodemus. The prevailing belief was that people were in God's kingdom because they were born from Abraham. "How are these things possible?" he asked. Nicodemus' reaction demonstrates how startled he was by the idea that people would need to enter God's kingdom by other means.

Jesus explains that the physical realm is different from the spiritual realm, and that natural birth could not regenerate the spirit. He acknowledges that this cannot be explained (v. 8). Like the wind, God's Spirit is invisible, unexplainable, and powerful.

3. Believing in the Son of Man (vv. 10–15)

Jesus is surprised that as a religious leader, Nicodemus does not understand about the Spirit. The Old Testament prophets foresaw a time when people would be regenerated by the Spirit. As a religious leader and skilled interpreter of the Law, Nicodemus should have understood about God's Spirit and His work in the lives of believers. If Nicodemus didn't believe the prophets' testimony, would he believe Jesus' testimony? Jesus challenged Nicodemus to do just that.

Jesus indicated that although Nicodemus is a respected religious leader, he had some trouble with spiritual matters. If Nicodemus had difficulty understanding spiritual truths that Jesus had explained in earthly terms, Jesus asked, how would he be able to understand the more abstract spiritual truths?

Jesus affirms that He is indeed from heaven, and like the Israelites, who had but to look up to Moses' bronze serpent ([Numbers 21:4–9](#)), those seeking forgiveness and entry into God's kingdom need only to look to Jesus for salvation. He was "raised up" in His crucifixion, and through His death and resurrection, He brought eternal life.

4. Jesus Came to Save (v. 16)

This verse presents the Gospel in short. God, motivated by love, gave His Son to bring salvation. His love was not just for a certain people group, but the whole world. Through His death, Jesus brought sinners, enemies of God, into His family and eternal life. Faith in Jesus takes us from condemnation to salvation and from death to life. Eternal life does not refer to length alone, but also a quality of life in the kingdom of God. God, in love, sent Jesus to make this new life possible.

Search the Scriptures

1. Why does Nicodemus believe that God is with Jesus ([John 3:2](#))?
2. How does one enter the kingdom of God (vv. 3, 5)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. It is easy to be consumed with the legal aspects of the Scriptures. It is even possible to be so focused on the Law that we miss the work of the Spirit. How can we maintain our commitment to the Scriptures and yet be sensitive to the Spirit?
2. God responded to human sin and rebellion in love. How can we accept His love, walk in it, and invite others to experience His love?

Lesson in Our Society

We might not be Jewish or have ancestral ties to Abraham, but the idea of being born into the kingdom of God is just as prevalent in our society. When asked about their faith, people will often remark that their mother is a Christian or that a grandparent is a pastor. We may be born into families that believe in Jesus, but each person, like Nicodemus, must approach Jesus for themselves.

Make It Happen

Often, people are unsure of how to approach Jesus and have faith in Him. Like Nicodemus, we need to seek Jesus and seek to learn from Him. Some things may be difficult to understand, but we must be open to the leading and instruction of the Spirit as we seek to know Jesus more.

More Light on the Text

John 3:1–16

1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

The Pharisees were regarded as the most devout keepers of the Law among the Jews. Thus they sought to guard the standards and judge the actions of the Jewish community. By the first century AD, the Pharisees were the most popular of the three main Jewish sects. The other two sects were the Essenes and the Sadducees. Although Pharisees were extremely detailed in all matters of the Law, their religion was often an outward show based on self-righteousness. Throughout Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees were bitter enemies of our Lord, and they sought to destroy His influence among the people.

The phrase “ruler of the Jews” means that Nicodemus also served on the Sanhedrin Council, which was composed of seventy priests, elders, scribes, and the high priest. Thus Nicodemus was a very powerful and educated man.

2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Under the cover of darkness, this man of religious authority sought Jesus out. He addressed Jesus as “Rabbi,” a title of honor used by the Jews to address doctors of the Law and distinguished religious teachers. By using this title, Nicodemus was giving honor and recognition to the divine authority of Jesus' teachings and signs that He was performing.

The “we” that Nicodemus speaks for is unclear. It would appear that he was speaking for the Pharisees and/or the Sanhedrin Council. But the Pharisees' behavior would seem to oppose any notion that they sincerely believed His work was God-inspired. Nicodemus was more likely referring to a group of Pharisees who were beginning to believe in Jesus. It is difficult to judge the sincerity of his statement.

Some have suggested that this could have been just a method of entrapment, as described by the other Gospel writers when referring to the Pharisees. If so, Nicodemus' heart was melted as he spoke with the Master Teacher.

3 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.

Verse 3 begins by saying Jesus “answered” (Gk. *apokrinomai*, **ah-poe-KREE-no-my**), which means to answer a question or to speak in response to something that is said or done. Nicodemus had not yet asked a question; however, something caused Jesus to give an answer. It might have been Nicodemus’ statement of faith, “we know that thou art a teacher come from God,” or it might have been that Jesus understood the true question that was in his heart. In either case, Jesus gives the following answer: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (from v. 3, NIV).

Nicodemus and many Jews of the time conceived of the kingdom of God as the rule of the foretold Messiah who would vanquish the enemies of Israel. John and Jesus use the phrase “kingdom of God” to mean Christ’s authority, and rule, and all of the blessings and advantages available to those who are subjects of God’s kingdom through faith in Christ.

Many thought that being a Jew by birth was to be born into the kingdom because of God’s covenant with Moses and the Children of Israel. But what is born of physical heritage is physical, and what is born of the Spirit is spiritual (cf. v. 6; see also [Galatians 3:26–29](#)).

4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?

Nicodemus’ question was a logical response. Notice that he didn’t ask, “How can a man be born again,” but “How can a man be born, when he is old?” According to Messianic scholar Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum of Ariel Ministries, Pharisaic Judaism had six different ways of being born again: (1) when Gentiles converted to Judaism; (2) when a man was crowned king; (3) when a Jewish boy becomes a bar mitzvah (son of the Law) at age 13; (4) when a Jewish man married; (5) when a Jew was ordained as a rabbi; and (6) when a Jew became the head of a rabbinical school. Except for the first two examples, Nicodemus had experienced all of the other rebirths. He had done everything right, but now Jesus tells Nicodemus that something else is lacking in his life.

5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

To enter God’s kingdom requires a new beginning, which Jesus describes as new birth. The metaphor of birth is used here to signal the beginning of life. Therefore, to be “born again” indicates the beginning of new (eternal) life from above.

To “be born of water” is natural birth. The child’s birth is preceded by a rush of water as the amniotic sac, which offered protection from the beginning, bursts open, as happens in all births. To be born of the Spirit was a different matter. This has to come from heaven. But Jesus did not say how this was to be done.

Perhaps one should look back to John’s statement in 1:12–13: “to them gave he power to become the sons of God ... which were born, not of blood, ... but of God.” By God’s power, we can trust

in Christ's redemptive work. Our new birth by the Spirit of God gives us membership in His family and entrance to His kingdom.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

The Greek word for "flesh" (*sarx*, **SARKS**) denotes both the physical body and fallen human nature apart from divine influence. This word is also translated as "carnal" ([Romans 8:7](#)). The Bible teaches that the flesh is prone to sin and selfishness, and it is therefore in opposition to the Spirit of God ([Romans 8:5–9](#)). Being "in the flesh" means being unrenewed; to live "according to the flesh" is to live and act sinfully ([Romans 7:5](#); [Ephesians 2:3](#)).

Flesh cannot enter into the kingdom of God. It belongs to the kingdom of this world, but the spirit belongs to heaven. Flesh and spirit do not share the same realm. One is temporal and the other eternal (see [1 Corinthians 15:50](#)).

7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

In [Psalm 51:5](#), David acknowledges, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." In verse 10, he asks: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Like David, we each have inherited a sin nature from Adam (cf. [Romans 5:12](#)). Similarly, in [John 3:7](#), it is as if Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, "Do not be surprised that something drastic must happen to transform the human nature."

The word "must" (Gk. *dei*, **day-EE**) indicates that the new birth is an absolute necessity. Our God represents holiness in the highest sense (cf. [Isaiah 6:3](#); [Revelation 15:4](#)). To enter His kingdom and become His children, we must be radically transformed (see [1 Peter 1:16](#); [Hebrews 12:14](#))—we, who have been "born of the flesh," must be "born of the Spirit."

8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

In Greek, as well as in Hebrew, the same word (*pneuma*, **PNEW-ma**) is used for both "spirit" and "wind." The wind cannot be controlled because God directs it. Though the source of the wind is invisible, the effect, or evidence, of its activity is plain. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Those who are controlled by the Spirit are controlled by God and their source is invisible although their actions are plain.

9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

Perhaps Nicodemus was questioning how one can become born of the Spirit. Jesus did not explain how this might be achieved, only that it is a requirement for entering the kingdom of God. Another possibility is that Nicodemus, as a Pharisee who regulated Israel's worship standards, was concerned about the apparent freedom of those born of the Spirit. How could such freedom be permitted? Unregulated lives and worship practices might endanger the established religious system. After all, their history was full of such apostasies.

10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

Jesus uses the word “master” (Gk. *didaskalos*, **dee-DAS-ka-lohs**) to describe to Nicodemus as one who is expertly qualified to teach, or who thinks that he is. The NIV renders this question as: “You are Israel’s teacher ... and do you not understand these things?”

Nicodemus could not teach what he does not understand himself. Thus the people would never find out this crucial truth from teachings of the Pharisees.

11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

Nicodemus—a prominent Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin Council, a doctor of the Jewish Law, and a spiritual leader—did not know these things. However, Jesus makes it clear that He and His followers know the truth through firsthand experience ([John 7:16](#), [8:38](#), [1 John 1:3](#)). Yet Nicodemus and the Jewish authorities refused to believe them.

12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

When He talks about “earthly things” (Gk. *epigeios*, **eh-PEE-gay-occe**), meaning the things that occur on earth, Jesus is likely speaking of His analogies related to birth, wind, and water. The phrase “heavenly things” (Gk. *epouranios*, **ep-oo-RAH-nee-os**) refers to things that exist or take place in heaven.

The word “believe” (Gk. *pisteuo*, **peas-TEW-oh**) means to think or be persuaded that something is true; to place confidence, conviction, and trust in something or someone. This word is used in [John 3:12](#), [15–16](#) to identify a critical requirement. If Nicodemus would not believe or trust Jesus’ explanation of mere earthly things, how could he possibly believe or trust the truth about the more important heavenly things associated with the kingdom of God?

13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

Jesus is more than qualified to reveal the truth about heavenly things because He alone came down from heaven, has ascended into heaven, and is currently in heaven (see [John 6:38](#); [Mark 16:19](#); [Ephesians 4:10](#)).

The phrase “Son of man” appears in the Old Testament primarily to specify a member of humanity (cf. [Psalm 8:4](#)). It was also used to refer to the prophet in the book of Ezekiel (e.g., [Ezekiel 2:1](#)). Later in the apocalyptic book of Daniel, one sees a new development in the use of the phrase ([Daniel 7:13](#)). The “Son of man” takes on the character of a divine agent who will carry out judgment and deliverance.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

In the wilderness when the Israelites murmured against God, He sent fiery (i.e., poisonous) serpents among the people to bite them, and many Israelites died. When the people repented, the Lord told Moses to make a bronze serpent, and set it upon a pole. Then if anyone who was bitten would look at that bronze serpent, they would live (Numbers 21). Our just and merciful God provided a means of salvation for a disobedient people, so that they might survive divine judgment.

The phrase “lifted up” is translated from the Greek word *hupsōo* (**hoop-so’-o**), which means to lift up on high or to exalt; both definitions apply in this verse. Nicodemus might have been among the first to learn that Jesus would be lifted up physically on the Cross of Calvary to become the source of salvation for all who will look to Him in faith. In addition, Jesus Christ should be exalted as Savior and Lord in the heart and life of every believer, and He will ultimately be exalted in all the earth ([Philippians 2:8–11](#)). The One who suffered death for us is the source of life for all who believe.

16 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](#) is one of the most beloved verses in all of Scripture. However, in this study, we must also remember that it is found in the context of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Out of the darkness of night, under the shadow of uncertainty, Nicodemus came to Jesus, the Light of the world. It is in [John 3:16](#) that Nicodemus (and each of us) finds the answer: God takes away our sins and grants us new birth, or “everlasting life,” because of His unmerited love for us, which is manifested by the sacrifice of His Son and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Say It Correctly

Nicodemus. ni-co-**DEE**-mus.
Listeth. lis-**TITH**.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God's Salvation is for the World
([John 3:17-21](#))

TUESDAY

Don't Love the World's Things
([1 John 2:15-17](#))

WEDNESDAY

Nicodemus Pleads "Give Jesus a Hearing"
([John 7:45-52](#))

THURSDAY

The Serpent in the Wilderness
([Numbers 21:4-9](#))

FRIDAY

Nicodemus Brings Spices for Burial
([John 19:38-42](#))

SATURDAY

Rebirth and Renewal by Water and Spirit
([Titus 3:1-7](#))

SUNDAY

God's Saving Love in Christ
([John 3:1-16](#))