

Lesson 4 Notes

John 3

Focus Verse

“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.” (John 3:16)

Outline

- Nicodemus Encounters Jesus – John 3:1-15
- Jesus Alone Brings Salvation – John 3:16-21
- John the Baptist Exalts Jesus – John 3:22-36

Engage

Did darkness frighten you as a child? Even as adults, the darkness of today’s world alarms us as uncertainty, violence, sin, fragility, and vulnerability surround us. **Humanity’s darkness threatens our joy, contentment, and hope for the future.** Sometimes we choose physical or metaphorical darkness to hide what we don’t want others to see, know, or believe about us. We might even try to hide from God, who sees and knows all.

God responded to our need in a glorious way: Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, left heaven’s glory to dispel darkness. Under the cover of night, Jesus shed light on Nicodemus’s greatest need—to be born again. This conversation helps us understand the light of salvation that Jesus shines on humanity. John the Baptist also aimed the spotlight on the One who came to save. **Jesus offers the world the profound gift of Himself.** He bids us to believe in Him and receive His gift. **Jesus gives light and new life to those who believe in Him.**

✦ Nicodemus Encounters Jesus – John 3:1-15

Jesus increasingly attracted attention as His public ministry progressed. He cleared the temple courts, foretold His resurrection, and performed signs that revealed His divine authority. Everything Jesus did stirred curiosity and raised questions. Many professed to believe but Jesus knew the truth about their hearts. Most in the gathering crowd did not truly know or understand that Jesus was their Messiah and Savior and surrender to Him.¹

Light in the Darkness – 3:1-3

Who Was Nicodemus? – 3:1

A Pharisee named Nicodemus became intrigued by Jesus. **A wealthy member of the Pharisees, a scholarly sect of Jewish leadership, Nicodemus also served as an influential member of the**

1. Jesus knows hearts: John 2:23-24

Sanhedrin—the ruling council. **Nicodemus did not oppose Jesus but neither was he convinced that Jesus was the Messiah.** Because the Pharisees had already begun to oppose Jesus,² Nicodemus exercised guarded curiosity and discretion in meeting Jesus.

Nicodemus sought a private conversation with Jesus at night to ask his rising questions, likely unwilling to compromise his stature among his peers and community. **Little did Nicodemus know that he would encounter the Light of the World in the darkness of that night.**

Who Is Jesus? – 3:2

A well-schooled authority on Jewish scripture, Nicodemus respectfully greeted Jesus as “Rabbi.” Nicodemus approached Jesus with a power-packed statement revealing his understanding that Jesus’s miracles revealed divine power. **Nicodemus’s words set up a basic question every person must answer: Who is Jesus?**

Jesus’s Response – 3:3

Rather than responding directly to Nicodemus’s statement, Jesus reached for this curious Pharisee’s heart. “Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’” As a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed religious knowledge, upright character, and the high regard of his peers adequately prepared him to enter God’s kingdom.

Like all Jewish boys, Nicodemus had been circumcised eight days after birth, the mark of belonging to God’s people. He lived as a devout and upright Jew and did not doubt his place in God’s kingdom. However, Nicodemus’s conversation with Jesus took an unexpected turn. **Jesus upended Nicodemus’s preconceived ideas by unveiling his need to be born again.**

Exposed to the Light – 3:4-8

Practical Question – 3:4

Nicodemus responded to Jesus’s stunning statement with a practical question. He could not fathom the physical perplexity behind the words “born again.” Nicodemus reasoned that no one could reenter their mother’s womb. John records multiple times when people routinely misunderstood Jesus.³

Yet Nicodemus possibly recognized a spiritual implication within Jesus’s answer. Could Jesus’s words mean that he lacked preparation to enter God’s kingdom despite his tidy religious background? **At this moment Nicodemus could not yet understand the spiritual truth Jesus declared. Like every human ever born, Nicodemus did not need a second beginning; he needed a new beginning—rebirth by the Holy Spirit.**

Born of Water and the Spirit – 3:5-8

Jesus continued to add depth and clarity to His first statement. His expanded explanation begins with a defining truth: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”

2. Rising opposition: John 2:18

3. Misunderstanding: John 2:19-21; 3:3-4; 4:10-11, 32-33; 6:32-33

Born of Water

“Water” has been understood in various ways.

Physical birth: This interpretation points to physical birth. Obviously to be saved, you first must be born. However, it seems unlikely Jesus would emphasize such an obvious fact with His hallmark introduction to crucial truth: “Very truly I tell you.”

Water baptism: Challenges exist with this interpretation. An outward action or ritual cannot produce new, spiritual life.¹ Rather the Holy Spirit imparts new spiritual life as only God can.² God commands water baptism but as an outward sign of this inward reality.

God’s Word: Throughout Scripture, water often represents the cleansing, life-giving power of God’s Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.³ Jesus declared His disciples clean “because of the word I have spoken to you.”⁴ Paul said Christ gave Himself up for the church “to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.”⁵ Peter likened believers’ purity, obedience, and love for one another with being “born again ... through the living and enduring word of God.”⁶

1. **Outward signs:** Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 2:15-16; 5:1-6
2. **Spirit gives life:** Job 33:4; Ezekiel 36:26-28; Galatians 6:8; 1 Peter 3:18
3. **Life-giving Word:** Deuteronomy 32:2; Isaiah 55:10-11; John 4:10; 7:37-39
4. **Cleansing Word:** John 15:3
5. **Cleansed church:** Ephesians 5:26
6. **Purifying truth:** 1 Peter 1:22-23

Born of the Spirit

Jesus explained the difference between being born of flesh and the Spirit.

Being born of “flesh” points to physical birth in a physical body, which includes our will, thoughts, and emotions. **Humanity’s fall in Eden left all flesh subject to temptation, weakness, sin, and death.**⁴ Though Jesus descended from heaven to be born in the flesh through a human mother,⁵ He is the only sinless person to ever live. Therefore, Jesus alone could offer the only appropriate sacrifice to pay for the sin of humankind.

Being born of “the Spirit” refers to new birth by the Holy Spirit, who indwells all who believe in Jesus as Savior. **Only God can give spiritual life, which allows a sinner to be born again as a new creation in Christ.**⁶ In this regenerated state, God gives His redeemed children a new will to live for Him. The Holy Spirit enables those who become a new creation in Christ to “see” God’s kingdom. With God-given spiritual eyesight, believers understand that God has rescued them from their sinful state and delivered them “into the kingdom of the Son he loves.”⁷ The Spirit gives believers eternal life and an unending relationship with God that cannot be reversed, even by physical death.⁸

4. **Fall:** Genesis 3
5. **Word became flesh:** John 1:14
6. **New creation:** 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10
7. **Rescued:** Colossians 1:13
8. **Eternal security:** John 10:27-29

Jesus compared the Spirit with the wind, an unseen but observable expression of nature.

Those born of the Spirit recognize His leading. In both Hebrew and Greek, the original languages of the Bible, the word for spirit is also the word for wind. The Holy Spirit is as refreshing as a cool breeze on a hot day.

The Fulfilled Promise – 3:9-15

Spiritual Ignorance – 3:9

Despite his vast knowledge of the Old Testament, Nicodemus remained perplexed. Unable to grasp Jesus’s disconcerting words and seemingly challenged for a meaningful response, Nicodemus simply asked, **“How can this be?”**

“What We Know” – 3:10-11

Despite his extensive learning, Nicodemus remained blinded by unbelief. Jesus marveled that Israel’s teacher failed to understand what Scripture plainly promised and that Jesus came to fulfill. **By contrast, Jesus’s first disciples—unschooled fishermen—immediately left their livelihoods to follow Him.**⁹ Their first encounter with Jesus resulted in belief in Him as the Messiah. Nicodemus questioned who Jesus is, whereas the disciples accepted Jesus with childlike faith.¹⁰

Jesus exposed the root of Nicodemus’s confusion—a refusal to believe. The plural “we” in Jesus’s statement regarding those who know and see likely **includes His Father and the Holy Spirit as well as those who already believed.** Faithful followers such as John the Baptist and Jesus’s disciples recognized God’s glory in Jesus. **Conversely the Jewish leaders, including Nicodemus, witnessed Jesus’s authority but refused to believe.**

Divine Authority – 3:12-13

Belief in Jesus, the one God sent, is the only way to know and understand heavenly truth. As their conversation continued, so did Jesus’s call for Nicodemus to believe. **Jesus, the Son of Man, came from heaven to reveal eternal truth.** He challenged Nicodemus to acknowledge His divine authority and accept Him as the promised Messiah. Jesus taught with authority. He alone came from heaven to declare truth about Himself and His kingdom.¹¹

The Cross to Come – 3:14-15

Reaching back to an Old Testament text that would have been familiar to Nicodemus, Jesus offered a tremendous revelation—the redemptive work of the cross. **Responding to His people’s rebellion in the wilderness, God brought a plague of poisonous snakes.**¹² The dying Israelites asked Moses to pray. God commanded Moses to make a bronze snake **which illustrated the sting of sin and death. As the snake was lifted on a pole, God promised He would heal anyone bitten who looked at the snake.** **This miraculous physical deliverance received by looking at the snake pointed to Jesus and His defeat of death on the cross, a demonstration of God’s mercy for humanity.**

9. **Followed the Messiah:** Matthew 4:18-22; John 1:41, 49

10. **Childlike faith:** Luke 18:17

11. **Witness to the Father:** John 1:18

12. **Plague of snakes:** Numbers 21:6-9

Jesus told Nicodemus that He, the only Son of God, came to take our sin, death, and punishment. He would be lifted up like the snake.¹³ The Israelites who obeyed God's Word in faith and looked at the snake lived. All who look by faith to Jesus, who bore sin's punishment on the cross, receive eternal life. Because of Jesus's sacrifice, believers do not face eternal punishment but live as God's beloved children by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

The words "so the Son of Man must be lifted up" point first to the cross and also look ahead to Jesus's ascension into glory as the Son of Man and Son of God.¹⁵ To receive eternal life by faith is to see Christ uplifted and dying for you on the cross and now ascended into heaven alive forevermore. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [Him]".¹⁶ He is our Lord and our Savior, equal with God the Father.

✦ Jesus Alone Brings Salvation – John 3:16-21

God chose to save us because He loves us. Willingly and obediently, Jesus Christ took on flesh, casting His light in our dark world. He came to die in our place so we might live with Him forever. God is love. God is light. God is our salvation.

The Love Gift: Jesus – 3:16

At this point the dialogue with Nicodemus seems to stop, and John writes words that crystallize and summarize Jesus's amazing message. The wonder contained in this well-loved verse can be lost in its familiarity. Out of His great love, the Father willingly offered His only Son to die on the cross as an atonement for our sin.¹⁷ God's own Son suffered so that eternal life and joy would be available to all who believed. Had God's love for humanity been less or had there been another way, God never would have sent His Son to die. Those who receive God's love gift of Jesus receive life for all eternity.

When people truly believe in Jesus, they have everlasting life now and have "crossed over from death to life."¹⁸ Believing this, we can live with confidence in Jesus's profound promise: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."¹⁹

No Condemnation – 3:17

Jesus came to earth to redeem, not condemn, humanity. Jesus came to make salvation possible.²⁰

Death without Him – 3:18

Like two sides of the same coin, salvation for all who believe means judgment for those who do not. All people are like sheep, prone to stray and destined to perish.²¹ Many people joke

13. Jesus took our sin: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24

14. Salvation: John 5:24; Romans 8:1, 14-17

15. Jesus's ascension: Acts 2:33; 5:31; Philippians 2:9

16. Jesus's authority: Matthew 28:18

17. Atonement: John 10:11; 15:13

18. Crossed over to life: John 3:36; 5:24

19. Eternal life: John 10:28

20. Savior: 1 Timothy 4:10

21. Like sheep: Isaiah 53:6

about or reject the idea of hell. However the reality of hell does not change because someone dismisses the idea. Jesus's frequent warnings and the teaching of Scripture make judgment in hell and the dreadful face of eternal punishment clear.²²

To refuse to believe and receive God's gift means to receive the "second death."²³ Hell represents the eternal, conscious torment that results from rejecting Christ. Just as Scripture describes the incomprehensible beauty and blessing of God's eternal kingdom,²⁴ the reality of hell is far worse than we can fathom.²⁵

Light Versus Darkness – 3:19-21

Jesus brings light into this darkened world. Those who reject Jesus love darkness, sin, and rebellion against God. **Only Jesus delivers people from the sin so deeply rooted within us.** He brings people out of darkness and into the light of His love. A desire for Jesus and His power in your life indicates that you truly seek God and His goodness and light. John's Gospel does not record Nicodemus's response to the truth about salvation that Jesus presented. Later when the Sanhedrin attacked Jesus, Nicodemus called for patience in giving Jesus a hearing.²⁶ And after Jesus's death, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus's body off the cross and wrapped Him in spices and linen in accordance with the Jewish burial customs.²⁷ Many believe that Nicodemus responded to Jesus's offer of salvation after this encounter but before Jesus's crucifixion.

John the Baptist Exalts Jesus – John 3:22-36

Disciples' Concern – 3:22-26

After His encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus left Jerusalem for the province of Judea where John the Baptist continued to call people to repent and be baptized. During this time, Jesus baptized people as well. **Earlier, Jesus personally identified with us through His own baptism by John.**²⁸

John the Baptist's disciples saw his influence waning as Jesus's popularity grew. The thought of another teacher siphoning people from the godly man they loved, admired, and followed concerned them. They took their complaint directly to their leader.

God's people are not immune from shortsighted envy and its divisive results. Paul admonished the church at Corinth for their contentious alignment around their preferences.²⁹ Jesus Himself would admonish His disciples for lobbying for positions of prominence.³⁰ John the Baptist could easily have felt neglected or forgotten as the spotlight shifted to Jesus, who seemingly owed much to John the Baptist for introducing Him to the world.

22. **Eternal punishment:** Matthew 7:13; 11:24; 18:6, 8; Luke 16:19-31; John 3:36

23. **Second death:** Revelation 20:14-15

24. **Eternal kingdom:** Revelation 21-22

25. **Reality of hell:** Matthew 13:42, 49-50; 25:41; John 8:24

26. **Nicodemus calls for hearing:** John 7:50-51

27. **Burial customs:** John 19:39-40

28. **Jesus's baptism:** Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:31-34

29. **Believers' preferences:** 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

30. **Seeking prominence:** Matthew 18:1; 20:20-22

From the Darkness of Death to the Light of Life

The Doctrine of Salvation

Nicodemus did not realize he was a man in need of Jesus's salvation. Nicodemus and all people enter the world as sinners deserving death. Jesus, our only hope, died in our place.

As we are born again through faith in Jesus Christ, we receive God's gift of salvation. The sins for which Jesus died will never rise to accuse or haunt believers again.¹

Salvation in Christ brings freedom from sin's penalty, power, and presence. Sin results in death:² physical death and spiritual death—eternal condemnation by God and separation from Him. Through His death on the cross, Jesus bore sin's death penalty for all who place their faith in Him. Salvation from sin's power describes the present dimension of salvation. The Holy Spirit works within a believer to recognize and overcome sin in daily life.³ This gradual victory over sin's power will not be complete until we are glorified. Although we still struggle on earth with sin's pull and power, all Christians anticipate a future day when Jesus ushers in a new creation and they are forever delivered from sin's presence.⁴

To ignore or reject Jesus's gift of salvation means you must bear sin's penalty and live under its present bondage without hope of eternal deliverance. If Jesus does not pay the price for your sin, you must bear that burden yourself. Purpose in life and assurance regarding eternity rest on Jesus Christ and His gift of love. Without faith in Jesus's atoning sacrifice and resurrection life, the grave beckons without hope.

God did not ignore our perilous state as sinners but sent His own Son to die a death He did not deserve to give us life we could not earn. Because of Jesus, believers face the challenges of life and the certainty of physical death with unquenchable hope. Sin's cost is paid. Sin's tyranny is broken. Sin's stranglehold will end. The glory of Christ and the wonder of His love bring a heart of humility and gratitude for such an indescribable gift. Jesus came to earth so we could walk in the light with Him. What a wonderful Savior!

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1. **Sin forgiven:** Psalm 103:11-12; Isaiah 38:17; Jeremiah 31:34
 2. **Sin's wages:** Romans 6:23
 3. **Overcoming sin's power:** Romans 6; 8:1-17; Philippians 2:13; Colossians 1:13-14.
 4. **Sin's presence removed:** Revelation 21:1-8

John the Baptist's Reply – 3:27-30

John the Baptist's wise and humble reply proves his godliness, surrender, and God's purpose for all believers. He recognized the truth: It's all about Jesus. !

John the Baptist contentedly focused on the work God had given him.³¹ He repeatedly confirmed that he was not the Messiah.³² He rejoiced when Jesus, the Bridegroom, made Himself known.³³ John the Baptist remained clear about his place and purpose—God called him to point and make way for the One who came to save.

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31. **Believer's purpose:** Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 12:2
 32. **Not the Messiah:** John 1:19-20
 33. **The Bridegroom:** Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:4-11; John 1:29-34

John the Baptist felt utter delight when people left him to follow Jesus because he saw the visible fruit of his obedient, God-honoring labor. **John the Baptist rejoiced that God had sent him to point others to Jesus, the Bridegroom.** His role was to be a friend who brings to the Bridegroom the bride—God’s people, the church. What a friend John the Baptist had in Jesus!

John the Baptist closed with an inspiring statement that should challenge us—“He **must become greater; I must become less.**” **His deepest desire was for Jesus to become greater.** If you have received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, **is this your life’s goal? Seeking a following represents a true temptation.** There is no higher calling than leading others to Jesus.

The Greatness of Jesus – 3:31-36

Four Qualities – 3:31-35

Four distinct qualities set our Lord Jesus Christ apart from John the Baptist.

- **Jesus’s origin – 3:31:** Jesus was and is above all. Jesus is from heaven; John is from earth.
- **Jesus’s insight – 3:32:** Jesus declared what He had seen and heard in heaven. John the Baptist’s knowledge, while inspired by the Holy Spirit, was limited. “No one accepts his testimony” refers to most people in John the Baptist’s day and, sadly, in our day. Counter to the world’s thinking, John the Baptist accepted God’s Word as true. Still he had only partial knowledge.
- **Jesus’s truthfulness – 3:33:** Jesus spoke the very words of God. All that Jesus says is true. Jesus brings the “last word” of God.³⁴
- **The Holy Spirit without limit – 3:34-35:** John the Baptist ministered in the Holy Spirit’s power, but Jesus alone baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Though fully God, Jesus lived as a man indwelt by the Holy Spirit without limit. The Father placed all things in the hands of Jesus, His only, beloved Son.

Eternal Life – 3:36

This chapter ends with a resounding conclusion: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” One of two destinies awaits every person. God’s wrath remains suspended over everyone who does not turn to Christ for salvation. God’s Word could not be clearer, and His gift could not be more glorious. He wipes away the debt and shame of sin. **Jesus gives light and new life to those who believe in Him.**

✦ Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Nicodemus approached Jesus in the dark and was exposed to the Light of the World. In His dialogue with this inquisitive Pharisee, Jesus outlined for all believers the necessity of being born again to see the kingdom of God. No mere wise and righteous teacher, Jesus is God in

34. Last word: Hebrews 1:1-3

the flesh. Through faith in Jesus, believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit and promised an eternal relationship with God beginning immediately and continuing into the heavenly kingdom. **To believe in Christ is to believe He is the Son of God.** This is what you were created for. To believe in Jesus is to lean on Him, love Him, and flourish in His light.

John the Baptist loved Jesus. God gave him the role and privilege of introducing Jesus to the world. John the Baptist did not feel slighted by taking a secondary role but fulfilled His God-given purpose with contentment and joy. He never sought to collect disciples for himself. **John the Baptist modeled Jesus's call to all His followers—to share the gospel with the world and make disciples of all nations.**³⁵

Apply It

Nicodemus, a well-educated and admired leader, lived a morally upright life. Yet he remained a sinner in need of the Savior. He sought out Jesus with curious questions. What questions do you have for Jesus? How do the words “you must be born again” speak to you? If you are uncertain about the idea of new birth, will you pour out your questions to God? **Faith is not a leap in the dark but reasonable trust in eternal truth.** Today God calls you to step into the light of His truth—questions and all! **How might you allow the Lord to provide necessary answers as you trust Him?** If you know Jesus by faith already, then rejoice in what you have received—forgiveness and new life—as an amazing eternal gift from God.

Jesus spoke the truth to Nicodemus—no one may enter God's kingdom unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **God gives everlasting life through His Word and the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit.** Today many people of the world and even in our churches, believe if they behave well, they will earn God's favor. At the same time, these same people hesitate to give complete allegiance to Jesus. **Jesus knows the hearts of all people—those who truly seek Him and those who do not. Nicodemus was curious enough to seek Jesus out but not courageous enough to walk into the light at that moment.** What do you risk in following Jesus? Where do you take your questions or concerns? Go to the source of truth and perfect wisdom. The world is full of people who “stand condemned” and will perish unless they know and believe in Jesus. Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save us. If you have questions, who will you speak with regarding salvation? **Will you ask God to guide you as you tell others about the salvation that comes only through God's Son?**

John the Baptist's example of humility and surrender should inspire us. How easy it is to seek the attention and favor of others and to desire our fame more than God's glory. John the Baptist stepped up to obey God and stepped back to exalt Jesus. In what ways do you struggle to achieve that balance? Denying self remains a constant battle, even as we seek to serve the Lord. How willing are you to serve God and others in ways people seldom notice? How bold are you to step up and speak out when doing so risks the criticism of others? **Pointing to Jesus represents the greatest privilege we can experience.** How willing are you to shine the light on the Light of the World? The giver of life is worthy of the wholehearted devotion of our lives.

35. Make disciples: Matthew 28:18-20