

Everyone Who Believes

Jesus offers eternal life to all who believe in Him.

JOHN 3:4-18

MEMORY VERSE: JOHN 3:16

STUDY John 3:4-18, paying attention to why Nicodemus was confused. Use Explore the Text on pages 55-59 to gain insight into Jesus's response to Nicodemus's questions. Reflect on what aspects of salvation you have found confusing in the past.

CREATE a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 60-62. Focus on helping the group consider aspects of salvation that are difficult for people to accept today. Consider ways to incorporate this session's memory verse (John 3:16) into the group time.

GATHER the following items:

- Extra *Personal Study Guides* (PSGs)
- Whiteboard and red and blue dry erase markers or poster board and red and blue markers
- Any materials needed for the options on page 62.

Prepare to display:

- Pack Item 6** (*Key Verse: John 3:16*)

Make copies of:

- Pack Item 14** (*Handout: First-Century Jewish Factions*)

CONSULT the Explore the Bible website for ways to use a current news event to start and conclude the session (goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras).

REINFORCE the session by following up with anyone who spoke with you after group time about praying for a specific person who is not a believer or who is far from God.

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.)

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?**

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.

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

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. 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 anyone be born when he is 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 a second time** was incredulous. The way his inquiry was worded suggests that he expected a negative response.

Verses 5-7

Using **truly** ("truly, truly," ESV) 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 religions believe Jesus was saying that water baptism is required for 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*

VERSE 4

⁴ "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?"

VERSES 5-7

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again.

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 **born of the 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 **amazed** at His use of **born again**. *Amazed* connotes astonishment at some marvel 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 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."

Verse 8

Jesus often used common phenomena to illustrate uncommon spiritual truth. Here, He used the wind to help Nicodemus comprehend His meaning. The **wind blows where 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?**

VERSES 9-10

⁹ "How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus. ¹⁰ "Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?" Jesus replied.

HOW? (JOHN 3:9-13)

Verses 9-10

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 these things 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 **a teacher of Israel** 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," as translated in CSB. This combination emphasizes Nicodemus's reputation as a scholar, yet Jesus challenged him for not comprehending spiritual transformation. A prominent authority like Nicodemus should **know these things**.

Verses 11-13

Jesus employed words like **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

VERSES 11-13

¹¹ "Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven — the Son of Man.

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 **descended 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 questions about Jesus reveal what people trust for truth?**

VERSES 14-15

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

VERSE 16

¹⁶ 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.

BELIEVE (JOHN 3:14-18)

Verses 14-15

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 in Him** demands faithful response. Only those who look to Him with faith will receive eternal life.

Verse 16

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 **everyone** opens the door to anyone. The only qualifier is that the person **believes in Him**. As a result, people who have faith in Jesus **will 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

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 **anyone** 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 is already condemned**. Faith in the **one and only Son of God** brings the person out of condemnation and bestows the blessing of salvation. The **name** of the *Son of God* 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?**

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 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.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION

BEGIN: Before the group arrives, draw two columns on a large sheet of paper. Label one column “Goodbye 2022” and the other “Hello 2023.” Place pens and colorful sticky notes by the columns. As the group settles in, read the session’s opening paragraph on page 46 of the *Personal Study Guide* (PSG). Encourage group members to reflect on the question: ***What do you most look forward to with the start of a new year?***

SHARE: Direct attention to the message you wrote. Instruct the group to use the sticky notes to record things that they are hoping to say “Goodbye” to from 2022 and things they are looking forward to in 2023. Encourage individuals to put two or three notes under each column. Discuss some of the common responses for each.

TRANSITION: *While the new year offers a fresh start, it doesn’t mean we can get rid of everything from the previous year or that we will succeed in every goal we set. Thankfully, what’s true about a changing calendar is not true about an unchanging Savior. In this first lesson of the new year, we will see what it means to get a fresh start with Jesus.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: First-Century Jewish Factions*). Use the information about Pharisees and content from the first paragraph of Explore the Text (PSG, p. 48) to introduce Nicodemus. Focus on his background as an expert in the law. Explain that this background informed the way he thought about salvation and Jesus.

ASK: ***How does your background influence the way you understand and respond to Jesus?***

TRANSITION: *Our personal history has an impact on our relationship with Jesus. It can draw us closer to Him or, as with Nicodemus, it can make it hard to trust and accept Him. Think about where you stand with Jesus as we walk through today’s verses.*

READ: **Call for a volunteer to read aloud John 3:4-8**, as the group considers why Nicodemus was confused.

STUDY: ***According to Jesus, what does being born again allow someone to do?*** Discuss responses. Ask: ***What does the term kingdom of God bring to mind?*** Lead the group in reviewing the Key Doctrine on page 48 of the PSG, along with the corresponding verses. Lead the group to discuss how people might misunderstand the “kingdom of God” and how we can help them understand it better.

CROSS-REFERENCE: Divide the group into teams of two or three and direct each team to complete the Bible Skill activity. (PSG, p. 49) Encourage teams to also scan the comments on being “born again” under verses 4-8 on pages 49-50 of the PSG. Allow a volunteer from each team to share what stood out from their discussion.

DISCUSS: ***What do people find confusing about salvation coming through faith in Jesus alone?*** (PSG, p. 50). Explain that Nicodemus likely understood the kingdom of God in the context of the end times, not God’s current rule over the lives of individuals.

STATE: *His rule begins when individuals give their lives to Christ. Unfortunately, many struggle with the idea that Jesus alone can save them. They want to work for it or be “good enough” to meet God’s standards. But Jesus was clear: Rebirth in Him is the only way one can enter the kingdom of God.*

SHARE: Direct the group to turn to the inside front cover of the PSG. Spend a few minutes sharing the Plan of Salvation.

EXPLAIN: *If you have already accepted Jesus as your Savior, that's great. This is a good time to think about how you can be an effective witness for Him in the year ahead. But if you have not made that decision, there is no better way to start the new year than by being born again. I would be happy to talk more about that decision with you after the group time today.*

READ: Call on someone to read John 3:9-13. Direct the group to pay attention to how Jesus describes Himself here.

IDENTIFY: Ask: ***How do a person's questions about Jesus reveal what they trust for truth?*** (PSG, p. 51) Discuss responses. Point out that Nicodemus was still confused. Guide the group in scanning the PSG comments under verses 9-13 (pp. 50-51) to identify ways Nicodemus had expected to gain entrance into God's kingdom. Emphasize his status as a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin. ***What things might we be tempted to rely on to gain entrance into the kingdom?***

TRANSITION: *Jesus is the only way into the kingdom of God. To help Nicodemus understand His mission better, Jesus shifted to an illustration that would be very familiar to an expert in the Law of Moses.*

READ: Read aloud John 3:14-18, encouraging the group to look for how God is described in these verses.

CLARIFY: Direct the group to review the comments on verses 14-15 (PSG, p. 52). Lead them to identify parallels between the Israelites in the desert and people today. Emphasize that both are dying from sin and both have salvation readily available. Ask: ***How is salvation through Jesus different from the salvation offered in the desert?***

EVALUATE: On the board write, *The gospel is at once completely inclusive and completely exclusive.* Call on volunteers to share whether they agree or disagree. Point out that the gospel is inclusive because it is available for everyone and exclusive because it requires faith in Christ.

ASK: Was it more difficult for Nicodemus to accept the inclusivity or exclusivity of the gospel? Why? Which do people find more difficult to accept today? Show learners **Pack Item 6** (Key Verse: John 3:16). Call on the group to consider how John 3:16 supports both aspects of the gospel.

TRANSITION: *Jesus said He did not come to condemn anyone. He came to be the Savior of the world. We need to recognize our responsibility to be His partner in that task.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Point out the application statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 54). Lead the group to identify how those statements reflect the summary statement on page 46 of the PSG: *Jesus offers eternal life to all who believe in Him.*

RESPOND: Direct the group to the second set of questions under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 54). Encourage them to respond silently to the first question and list at least one name of an unbeliever or someone who is far from God in their PSG. Invite volunteers to share their answers to the second question: ***How can you use what Jesus shared with Nicodemus to initiate a conversation with them about Jesus?*** Remind the group that you are available to pray with them for the person they listed.

PRAY: Close in prayer, thanking God for loving the world and for sending Jesus to make eternal life possible.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Lead the group to listen to “Father Let Your Kingdom Come,” by The Porter’s Gate. Encourage group members to notice the joyful response to God’s kingdom and newness of life.

CASE STUDY

Place the groups into teams of three. Direct each team to review the different questions and confusions Nicodemus expressed to Jesus (PSG, pp. 50-51). Invite the teams to consider what questions and confusions people have today about salvation and new birth. Direct each team to develop a case study based on questions people might ask today. After teams present their case studies, lead the group to discuss ways they can respond to these questions with love and truth.

SOCIAL

Pre-enlist some volunteers to organize a New Year’s celebration for the beginning of group time. Suggest food and décor that focuses on the theme of the new year as a fresh start. Guide them to the introductory paragraph on page 46 of the PSG to connect this theme to the session.

MEMORIZATION

Guide the group in memorizing John 3:15-17. Since John 3:16 is a familiar verse, use this as a starting point. Display **Pack Item 6** (*Key Verse: John 3:16*) as an easy reference for those who may not have previously memorized John 3:16. Research memorization techniques and pick one or two to implement during group time.

OUTLINE

Gather pens and paper.

Lead the group in outlining the argument Jesus presented to Nicodemus. Encourage the group to note key points and then fill in additional details under those key points. Allow them to utilize any format they choose. Invite volunteers to share ways this helps them better understand the logical progression of Jesus’s argument. Ask: ***How can this help you in sharing the gospel with others?***

MINI-LECTURE

Pre-enlist a volunteer to present the account of Moses in the desert, which Jesus referenced when speaking to Nicodemus (John 3:14-15). Allow the volunteer to read or summarize the events in Numbers 21:4-9. Guide the volunteer to focus on the connections between this account and Jesus’s crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation, including what this means for our salvation. When the presenter is done, spend some time walking through the Plan of Salvation found on the inside front cover of the PSG and Leader Guide.