

Pursue the Relationship

(Nicodemus)

February 20, 2022



PURSUE

BUILDING FOR PEOPLE. BELIEVING FOR MORE.

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

John 3:1-18

Session Outline

1. Necessary Salvation (John 3:1-13)
2. Required Faith (John 3:14-17)
3. Coming Judgment (John 3:18-21)

Theological Theme

Because of the sinfulness of man, no person is fit for heaven. Therefore, it is necessary that a person be made new, righteous in the sight of God. The only instrument by which a person might be reborn and saved is faith.



Leader Guide

Nicodemus

Introduction

- ❓ Have you ever tried to convince someone of imminent danger?
- ❓ How did they respond? What was the result?

Rowland Hill was a faithful pastor in England during the mid-nineteenth century. He was known for his compelling preaching—often outdoors—calling the lost to repentance of sin and faith in Christ. Regarding his preaching, he was often accused of being an “enthusiast”.

To this charge, he said, “I am not; mine are the words of truth and soberness. When I first came into this part of the country, I was walking on yonder hill; I saw a grave-pit fall in, and bury three human beings alive. I lifted up my voice for help so loud that I was heard in the town below, at a distance of a mile; help came, and rescued two of the poor sufferers. No one called me an enthusiast then; and when I see eternal destruction ready to fall upon poor sinners, and about to entomb them irrecoverably in an eternal mass of woe, and call aloud on them to escape, shall I be called an enthusiast now?”¹

Rowland Hill knew that if the situation of those without Christ remained unchanged, then nothing but terrible condemnation awaited them. A change had to take place, and he would not be deterred from proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ because he knew that it was through the power of the gospel that a change of heart could take place in those who heard it.

For every person, the status quo leads to death. All have sinned against God and transgressed His law. All are bound for hell—an eternity without God—unless they are born again. This was Jesus’s message to Nicodemus the night he came secretly to speak with Jesus. This continues to be the message for all people today.

Session Summary

The gospel message is so simple that even a child can understand it. Each person is infected with a spiritual disease that is terminal 100 percent of the time. This disease is so deadly and so pervasive that those who are infected (and all are) have absolutely no hope of life unless there is some sort of intervention from an outside source. For no person can heal themselves. No person can cure themselves of this disease.

But God, in His unfathomable mercy and unmerited kindness, saves many. He rescues them from spiritual death and then preserves them into eternity. The way He saves the lost is through imputing Christ's active righteousness (by obeying the law) and His passive righteousness (by dying on the cross) to the account of everyone who wholly places their faith in Him and repents of their sin. When this happens, they are born again.

Without the new birth, no one will be saved.

1. A Necessary Salvation (John 3:1-13)

Nicodemus must have been shocked when Jesus said that unless he was born again, he would not see the kingdom of heaven. Nicodemus was a respected religious leader among God's chosen people. If anyone had any chance of seeing the kingdom of God, it would have been a Pharisee. They cared deeply about adherence to God's Law. In fact, they cared so much about God's law that they began to add rules on top of God's law so that they could be extra careful about obedience.

The Lexham Bible dictionary says that Pharisees were "Members of a Jewish party that exercised strict piety according to Mosaic law. The Pharisees were a sect within early Judaism, becoming active around 150 BC and enduring as a distinct party until being subsumed into the Rabbinic movement around AD 135."²




Why would a religious, law-keeping man like Nicodemus need to be born again?

Nicodemus needed to be born again because he was deficient. He did not have what he needed to be acceptable to God. Yes, he was very active in religious activities. He prayed, fasted, attended worship services, memorized Scripture, and kept the law of Moses. Nicodemus did not, however, have the ability to live in perfect and perpetual obedience to the laws of God. Nicodemus had a corrupted and wicked heart. He was depraved totally because of the sin of his first parents and his continued disobedience to the law of God. In short, he needed a circumcision of the heart. He needed God to put His Spirit in him, remove Nicodemus's heart of stone, and give him a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Nicodemus, like every person on the face of the earth, needed to be born again.


Wind and Spirit

In this fascinating conversation, Jesus moves from the metaphor of birth to that of breeze. Human effort can only produce human results (John 1:13), but the *pneuma*—that is a different story. This is a spiritual mystery known only to God and explainable only in terms that humans can grasp. The words *wind* and *spirit* are derived from the same Greek word. God brings the breeze when and where he chooses. This is a spiritual prototype for the way God brings people to faith.


-  Do people today need to be born again? Is it possible for someone to keep themselves out of hell by doing more good things than bad things? Explain.

It is common for a person to examine their own goodness by comparing themselves with others they know: “I may not be perfect, but at least I’m not as bad as that guy!” they will reason with themselves. The problem is that God doesn’t judge people on a curve. His measuring stick isn’t the behavior of our peers. Rather, His standard is His law.

All who are descendants of Adam and Eve are conceived in sin and are by nature children of wrath (see Psalm 51:5; Job 14:4; Ephesians 2:3). They are servants of sin and partake in the miseries of sin and eventually eternal death. This is the unavoidable fate of all people unless the Lord Jesus sets them free. The Scriptures say, “Now since the children have flesh and blood in common, Jesus also shared in these, so that through his death he might destroy the one holding the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

-  How can a person be born again? What did Jesus mean by this if not a physical rebirth?

Jesus was speaking of a spiritual birth, not a physical one. This spiritual new birth is possible because God has made it so by sending his Son Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners.


-  Application: What certainty do you have of where you will spend eternity? What is the basis of your certainty or lack thereof?

2. A Required Faith (John 3:14-17)

As the discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus continued, it became clearer what was required for new birth. Jesus said:

- “so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (v. 15)
- “so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (v. 16)
- anyone who believes in him is not condemned (v. 18)

Only those who wholeheartedly trust Christ will be saved. Faith is required.

-  The belief Jesus spoke of is often called faith in the Bible. What does it mean to have this kind of faith in Jesus? How is it characterized?

The author of Hebrews defined faith in this way: “Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Matthew Henry commented on this verse saying, “It is a firm persuasion and expectation that God will perform all that he has promised to us in Christ; and this persuasion is so strong that it gives the soul a kind of possession and present fruition of those things, gives them a subsistence in the soul, by the first-fruits and foretastes of them: so that believers in the exercise of faith are filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”³

The grace of faith is the work of the Spirit of Christ in a person’s heart (Ephesians 2:8). Faith is ordinarily produced by the ministry of the Word (Romans 10:14-17).



Why is it crucial that we not just have faith, but have faith or belief in Jesus specifically?

Faith has been chosen by God as the channel of His grace. It serves as a channel of God’s grace whereby a sinner may be saved. Charles Spurgeon gave an apt illustration to help us understand the role of faith in our salvation: “Suppose that I am about to give a poor man alms: I put it into his hand—why? Well, it would hardly be fitting to put it into his ear, or to lay it upon his foot; the hand seems made on purpose to receive. So, in our mental frame, faith is created on purpose to be a receiver: it is the hand of the man, and there is a fitness in receiving grace by its means.”⁴

Faith has an object. The object of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ. Look at verses 15-16 and 18. Jesus said those who believe in Him will be saved. Saving faith focuses directly on Christ. The sinner who turns to Christ with true faith accepts Christ, receives Christ, and rests upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life.

Those who place true faith in Jesus Christ and are born again will be preserved by Christ Himself (see Philippians 1:6). Jesus Christ nourishes faith and repentance in the hearts of all the Father has given Him. In other words, it is impossible for a true Christian to lose faith altogether. Their faith may be weak at times and strong at others. Yet, even in its weakest form, it will not be vanquished. A Christian’s faith may be attacked and assailed, but it will gain the victory.

If a person asserts that they were once a Christian, but have now abandoned the faith, they have shown to be true what was always true: It isn’t that this person lost their faith, but that they never had true faith to begin with (see 1 John 2:19).



Application: Have you put your faith in Jesus? How is God speaking to you about that today?

3. A Coming Judgment (John 3:18-21)

Jesus made a startling remark to Nicodemus. He said, “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” (v. 18). Here Christ made clear that it isn’t only faith that has consequences, but also disbelief. Those who believe in Christ will have eternal life, but those who reject Him will have eternal death.



What is the urgency for people to put their faith in Jesus?

Hebrews 9:27 says, “it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment.” God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ. All people must appear before the judgment seat of Christ: “He has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

On that day, God will show the glory of His mercy toward all those who are in Christ Jesus. Also, on that day He will show the glory of His justice in the eternal condemnation of those who continued in their sins and never turned to Christ.



What are some of the ways Christians should respond to the certainty of God’s coming judgment?

Christians should be fully convinced that a day of judgment will come. Knowledge and expectation of that day help Christians flee from sin. It also comforts the godly when they pass through the afflictions of this world, especially when they suffer at the hands of unbelievers. God has chosen to keep the day secret. This causes Christians to shake off any worldly security and always be watchful because they do not know the hour when the Lord will come.

Jesus Christ said concerning His return, “Therefore be alert, since you don’t know when the master of the house is coming—whether in the evening or at midnight or at the crowing of the rooster or early in the morning. Otherwise, when he comes suddenly he might find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to everyone: Be alert!” (Mark 13:35-37).



Application: Why should knowledge of God’s coming judgement lead Christians to share the truth of the gospel with others? How does that provide clarity of purpose for our lives?

Conclusion

Only those who are born again will see the kingdom of God. Those who place their faith in Jesus Christ will be saved from their sins and have eternal life. However, those who do not believe will be condemned at the judgment and pass into eternal death.

The reality of the judgment is a sobering and fearful thing for all of God's creatures. However, for those who are in Christ, they have peace from fear of the wrath of God, for the wrath that was due to them has already fallen upon Christ.

On that day, the judge on that great white throne will be Jesus of Nazareth. The same Jesus of Nazareth who said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And the One who said, "the one who comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). Those who have responded to that gracious call will not be afraid to come before Him.

- ❓ How might knowing you are saved by God's grace and not by works give you confidence in your walk with Christ? In your relationship with others?
- ❓ This week, how can you rely on God's grace rather than your own efforts to show love and compassion to others? How might His power work through your weakness as you do?
- ❓ What can we do to keep our relationships with Jesus the center of our lives this week? How might He transform our church and our impact on our community as we do?

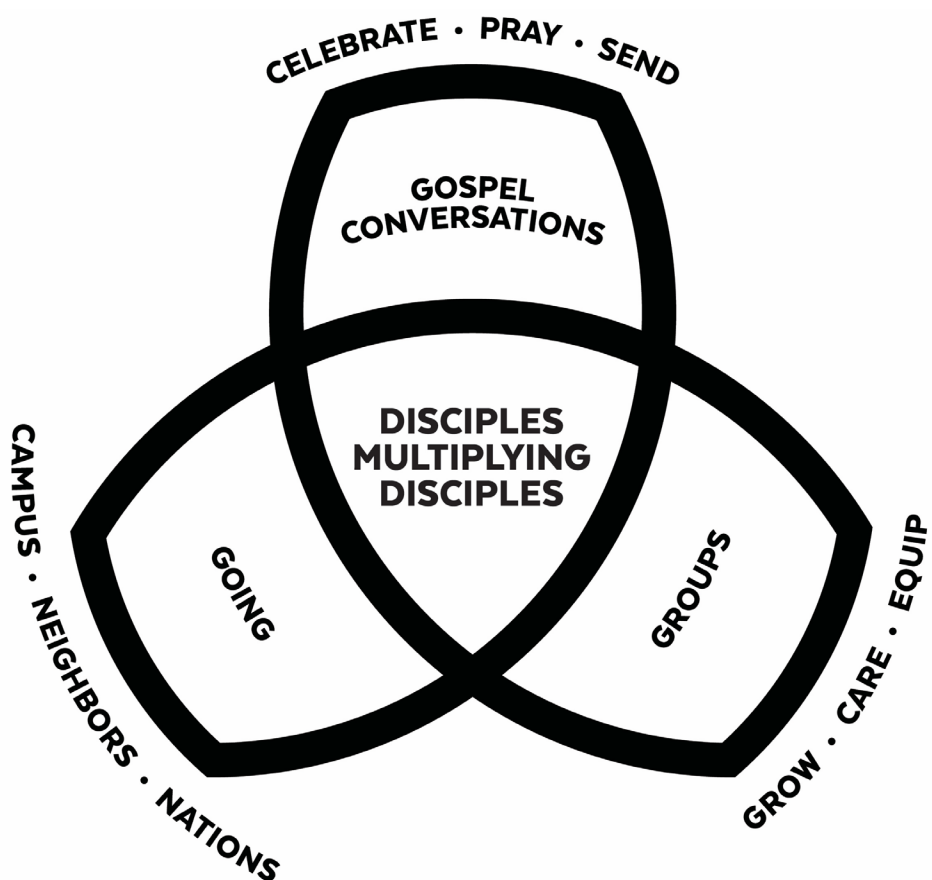
Prayer of Response

Ask the Lord to help you to remember and rejoice in the fact that He has provided for your salvation. Thank Him that He continues to nourish faith and repentance in you. Thank God for His preserving power in your life. Ask the Lord to make you watchful and comforted as you anticipate the coming judgment.

Additional Resources

- *Be Alive* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Gospel of John* by J. Ramsey Michaels
- *John* by Grant Osborne

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Group Emphasis

Take time to discuss who you could share the Nicodemus story with this week. Maybe even have special prayer time as a Group for Gospel Conversation opportunities.

For Next Week

Session Title

- Puruse the Person (Samaritan Woman)

Main Passages

- John 4:4-26

Session Outline

1. An Intended Encounter (John 4:4-8)
2. The Awful Truth (John 4:9-24)
3. Christ, the Hope (John 4:25-26)

Memorize

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.*

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

- John 3:16-17

Historical Context of John

Purpose

The purpose statement in 20:30–31 indicates that John wrote with an evangelistic purpose, probably seeking to reach unbelievers through Christian readers of his Gospel. If the date of composition was after AD 70, the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, it is likely that John sought to present Jesus as the new temple and center of worship for God’s people in replacement of the old sanctuary.

Author

A close reading of the Gospel of John suggests that the author was an apostle (1:14; cp. 2:11; 19:35); one of the Twelve (“the disciple Jesus loved,” 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20; cp. 21:24–25); and, still more specifically, John, the son of Zebedee (note the association of “the disciple Jesus loved” with Peter in 13:23–24; 18:15–16; 20:2–9; 21; and in Lk 22:8; Ac 1:13; 3–4; 8:14–25; Gl 2:9). The church fathers, too, attested to this identification (e.g., Irenaeus). Since the apostolic office was foundational in the history of the church (Ac 2:42; Eph 2:20), the apostolic authorship of John’s Gospel invests it with special authority as firsthand eyewitness (Jn 15:27; 1Jn 1:1–4).

Setting

The most plausible date of writing is the period between AD 70 (the date of the destruction of the temple) and 100 (the end of John’s lifetime), with a date in the 80s most likely. A date after 70 is suggested by the references to the Sea of Tiberias in 6:1 and 21:1 (a name widely used for the Sea of Galilee only toward the end of the first century); Thomas’s confession of Jesus as “my Lord and my God” in 20:28 (possibly a statement against emperor worship in the time of Domitian); the reference to Peter’s martyrdom, which occurred in 65 or 66 (21:19); the lack of reference to the Sadducees, who ceased to be a Jewish religious party after 70; and the comparative ease with which John equated Jesus with God (1:1, 14, 18; 10:30; 20:28).

Special Features

The Gospel of John is different from the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—in that more than ninety percent of its material is unique. John’s Gospel does not focus on the miracles, parables, and public speeches that are so prominent in the other accounts. Instead, the Gospel of John emphasizes the identity of Jesus as the Son of God and how we, as believers, should respond to his teachings.

Extended Commentary

John 3:1-18

3:1 Nicodemus was a common name in first-century Palestine. Ruler of the Jews refers to the Jewish governing body known as the Sanhedrin.

3:2 Nicodemus's coming to Jesus at night may have negative overtones ("night" is probably negative in 13:30 but not in 21:3; see also the reference to the present event without apparent negative connotation in 19:39). Coming from a "teacher of Israel" (3:10), the address *rabbi* denoted respect, especially since it was known that Jesus did not have formal rabbinic training (7:15). The signs mentioned in John's Gospel presumably included those performed in Jerusalem (2:23), possibly the temple clearing (cp. 2:18).

3:3–8 The discussion of the need for spiritual rebirth develops the reference to the "children of God" who are "born ... of God" in the prologue (1:12–13). On "children of God," see 8:39–58 and 11:51–52. The phrase born of water and the Spirit probably refers to spiritual birth that cleanses from sin and brings spiritual transformation (Ezk 36:25–27). The kingdom of God, a major topic in the other Gospels, is mentioned by John only in vv. 3, 5 (see the reference to Jesus's kingdom in 18:36).

3:7 You is plural, probably indicating Nicodemus and other Sanhedrin members (cp. vv. 1, 11).

3:8 Jesus illustrated his pronouncement of vv. 3–5 with an analogy between wind and a person born of the Spirit. Wind and Spirit translate the same Greek and Hebrew words (Gk *pneuma*; Hb *ruach*). While the wind's origin is invisible, its effects can be observed; it is the same with those born of the Spirit.

3:9–10 Jesus may here be "returning the compliment" (see note at v. 2), though he chastised Nicodemus for his lack of understanding.

3:11–12 Jesus's knowledge is firsthand rather than speculative or based on hearsay. The earthly things probably refers to the teaching on spiritual regeneration.

3:13 Jesus's statement may allude to Pr 30:4. Only Jesus descended from heaven and returned there (Lk 24:51; Ac 1:9).

3:14–15 The reference to the Son of Man being lifted up is the first of three "lifted up" sayings in John (8:28; 12:32). All three speak of the future "lifting up" of the Son of Man in double meaning (possibly inspired by the language of Is 52:13). The reference in this verse invokes Moses's lifting up of a serpent in the wilderness so that everyone who had been bitten by a poisonous snake and looked at the serpent in faith was healed (Nm 21:8–9). The third and final "lifted up" saying (Jn 12:32) emphasizes that the lifting up of the Son of Man refers to Jesus's crucifixion (cp. 12:33 and the similar reference to Peter's martyrdom in 21:19).

3:16–18 God, out of love, gave his one and only Son (cp. 1:14, 18), so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life (see notes at 5:26; 14:4–6). John’s favorite designation for Jesus is the Son sent by the Father (3:34–36; 5:19–26; 6:40; 8:35–36; 14:13; 17:1), imagery taken from the Jewish concept of the shaliach (messenger), according to which the sent one is like the sender himself and faithfully pursues the sender’s interests (13:16, 20). Jesus is that “sent one” par excellence (9:7), and he in turn sends his disciples. Being sent implies that the commission, charge, and message are issued by the sender rather than originating with the ones sent. The messengers’ role is to fulfill their commission according to their sender’s will.⁵

References

1. Edwin McKean Long, *Illustrated History of Hymns and Their Authors: Facts and Incidents of the Origin, Authors, Sentiments and Singing of Hymns, Which, with a Synopsis, Embrace Interesting Items Relating to Over Eight Hundred Hymn-Writers*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: P. W. Ziegler & Co., 1876), 215-216.
2. Bradley T. Johnson, “Pharisees,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
3. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Carol Stream, IL: Hendrickson, 1994), 2397.
4. Charles H. Spurgeon, *All of Grace: An Earnest Word with Those Who Are Seeking Salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ*, (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software), 58.
5. *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

Author Bio

Warren Wiersbe (Be Alive)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of Back to the Bible, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as “the pastor’s pastor.” He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.

J. Ramsey Michaels (Gospel of John)

J. Ramsey Michaels is emeritus professor of religious studies at Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri and adjunct professor of new Testament at Bangor Theological Seminary, Portland, Maine.

Grant Osborne (John)

Grant R. Osborne (1942-2018; PhD, University of Aberdeen) was professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He wrote a number of books, including *The Hermeneutical Spiral*.

Matthew Henry (Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible)

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) has been known and loved for three centuries for his devotional commentary on the Bible. It has not been generally known that he was also a distinguished preacher. He began preaching at twenty-four years old and held pastorates until his death. The greatness of his sermons consists in their scriptural content, lucid presentation, practical application, and Christ-centeredness.

Charles Spurgeon (All of Grace)

A prolific author and pastor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) remains a respected and influential source of inspiration and study. His classic collection of devotions for morning and evening remain a beloved treasure of wisdom and teaching for Christians.