



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

A PRIVATE CONVERSATION • Born from Above

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

John 3

The Gospel of John Continues

After his miracle at the wedding in Cana, Jesus disrupted business at the Temple. He made a whip out of cords and drove out the animals. He turned over the table of the money changers, dumping out their money. He told them, "Do not make my Father's house a house of trade!" His actions prompted a confrontation with Jewish leaders. Today we're picking up in John 3.

Background- The History of Israel

In many ways, the Old Testament era came to a close 400 years before Jesus was born. By 400 B.C., obedient Jews were returning from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. Malachi was prophesying. It was a time of renewal recorded in the biblical books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi. But it also marks the end of the Old Testament. After Malachi's ministry, prophesy ceased in Israel. God did not speak for the next 400 years. Theologians call this time period the Intertestamental era.

Four Hundred Years of Silence

The Intertestamental era (400 B.C. - A.D. 1) was a chaotic time for Israel. Various empires competed for domination of the world, and each one ruled Israel for a period. Persia controlled Israel initially. Then Alexander the Great created a vast empire and Greece ruled Israel. Then Egypt ruled Israel briefly. Then Rome arose, and became the greatest empire in history. Each of these empires introduced changes to Israel. The Egyptians, for instance, turned the office of the High Priest into a political position, and installed a cabinet of ruling officials called the Sanhedrin. The Greeks aggressively promoted Greek culture and Greek gods, prompting many Jews to revolt. Rome taxed Israel heavily.

Pharisees and the Sanhedrin

New types of political and religious leaders arose because of all these changes. By Jesus' day, Pharisees were one of the leading groups. Pharisees were scholars who tried hard to obey the laws in the Old Testament and a dizzying array of man-made laws which they added to the Old Testament. The Jews respected them and gave them great social, religious and political influence. Pharisees usually took great pride in their positions. Nicodemus, (in this passage), is also called a "Ruler of the Jews." That means he was also one of the elite 70 members of the Sanhedrin, the political / religious body that ruled Israel. The Sanhedrin ruled under the supervision of Herod, who reported directly to the Roman emperor. A Roman governor and legion were also stationed in the area.

What's the Big Idea?

The Son of God is the Light of the world, and all who look to Him are saved.

What's the Problem?

Mankind is in the darkness and often prefers the darkness to the light.



No-one Understands Jesus

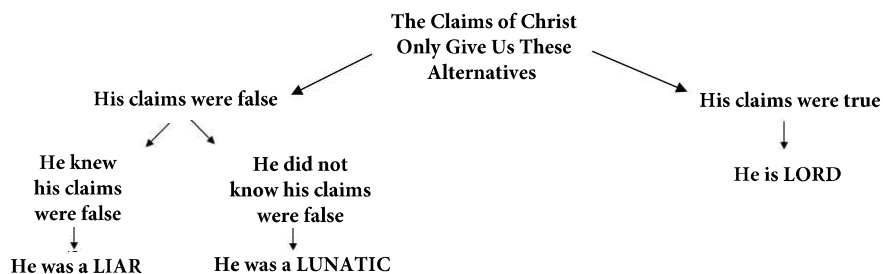
One of the key themes of the Gospel of John is how "No-one understands Jesus." As you read, take note of how people misunderstand him. Jesus was speaking of his body in John 2 when some Jews thought he was talking about the temple. In this passage, Nicodemus is going to make a similar mistake.

Words have various meanings, as you know. For instance, the meaning of the word "late" changes drastically according to how it's used in a sentence. Consider these examples: "Sorry I'm late." "The late Mr. Jefferson left his estate to his daughter."

Vs. 1-4 In order to understand Nicodemus' dilemma, you have to know something about a particular Greek word. The word is ἀνωθεν (anōthen). It means either "above" or "again." Nicodemus came to Jesus at night for a discreet conversation, and Jesus got right to the point. Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you, no-one can see God unless he is born ἀνωθεν (anōthen)." What he probably meant was "born from above." But what Nicodemus heard was "born again." And Nicodemus ran with that interpretation. "How can this be?" he said, "No-one can enter his mother's womb a second time..."

Vs. 5-8 Jesus told Nicodemus that he was confusing spiritual birth with physical birth. And he rebuked Nicodemus, saying, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" As a scholar of the Old Testament, Nicodemus should have recognized that Jesus was talking about the work of the Spirit (Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 3:25-27; Joel 2:28-29).

Nicodemus thought Jesus was just a special teacher. That's a common mistake. In his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis said: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said, wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg – or else he would be the devil of hell: you must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a demon: or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great moral teacher. He hasn't left that alternative open to us."



Vs. 9-21 Jesus referred to his incarnation in 3:13. And he shared a great image in verse 14. Be sure to unpack it. Read the story in Numbers 21:4-9. One time when the Israelites were being attacked by snakes, God had Moses put a bronze snake on a pole, and whoever suffered a snakebite could look at that snake and be healed. Just as Moses lifted that snake up in the wilderness to heal the people, Jesus would be lifted up on a cross to bring healing to the world.

And don't gloss over John 3:16. It's arguably the best one verse presentation of the gospel in the whole Bible and it's your memory verse. You will also visit 1st John 5:11-13 briefly. John's epistle corresponds very nicely with his gospel.

What's Our Response?

In this study you want your group to understand that everyone who looks to Jesus will be saved.

What Are the Questions?

John 3:1-21

LAUNCH

Can you think of a time when you received some important news?

EXPLORE

Read 3:1-2.

1. What do we know about Nicodemus, according to these verses?
2. What did it mean that he was a Pharisee?
3. Why did he come to see Jesus? Why did he come at night?
4. How did Nicodemus address Jesus? Was he correct? Why or why not?
5. If you were to walk up to Jesus today, how would you greet him?

Read 3:3-15.

6. How might you summarize Jesus' response in verse 3? Does it seem weird at first? What does the image of birth convey?
7. How did Nicodemus respond in verses 4 and 9? Did he understand what Jesus said?
8. What did Jesus mean by, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"?

9. Have you ever had a friend who began a new relationship with God? How would you describe the difference God made in their life?

10. Why was Jesus amazed at Nicodemus' ignorance (vs. 10-12)?

11. What did Jesus mean in verses 12-13?

Look up Numbers 21:4-9

12. What did Jesus claim about himself in verses 14-15?

Read John 3:16-21

13. Why does our response to God's Son determine our destiny?

14. According to this passage, did Jesus come to condemn the world? But how do those who reject Jesus end up?

15. What does the light in verse 19 represent? How many times is Jesus called "the light" in this passage? What do verses 20-21 mean?

Look up 1st John 5:11-13

16. The same John who wrote this gospel wrote the letter we call 1st John. According to these verses, why did he write that letter?

APPLY

17. Do you believe in Christ? Why or why not? Does 1st John 5:11-13 bring you comfort? Why or why not?

18. Who around you needs to look to Christ?

19. What are some reasons people have trouble believing in Jesus?

20. Jesus has already been called "the Light of the world" a dozen times in John so far. What would it look like for you to take some steps away from darkness into the light?

21. What would it look like for you to lead others into the light?

What Are the Answers?

1. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.
2. See the "What do I need to know about this passage" section.
3. This was obviously a private meeting. Nicodemus came to see Jesus because of his miracles and because he drove merchants out of the temple.
4. Yes and no. He's a Teacher who came from God, and God is with him, but he's much more than that as well. He's also the Son of God in the flesh! To help your group see what Nicodemus is missing, you might share the C.S. Lewis quote or the diagram from the "What you need to know about this passage" section or revisit John 1:1.
5. Discuss
6. Birth is one of many New Testament pictures of what happens when someone believes in Jesus Christ.
7. Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus' statement about a new birth. Maybe he had too much confidence in his heritage, being born as a Jew.
8. Jesus showed Nicodemus that the means of the new birth are not physical but spiritual. See Isaiah 44:3-5 for an example of water and wind as the life-giving symbols of the Spirit. See the sidebar for a special note.
9. Discuss
10. Nicodemus was a scholar who should have recognized Jesus' reference to water and spirit as the work of God. Consult Isaiah 44:3-5 and Ezekiel 37:9-10.
11. Jesus stated that he had come from heaven and was speaking of spiritual realities he had personally witnessed.
12. Look up Numbers 21:4-9. This is a great image. Jesus stated: "Just as Israelites were saved by looking to the snake Moses lifted up, mankind is saved by looking at me, when God lifts me up on a cross."
13. It's a big deal to miss Jesus because he's the Son of God. See Hebrews 10:28-29.
14. Jesus did not come to condemn the world (vs. 17) but those who reject him certainly wind up condemned (vs. 18).
15. "The light" represents Jesus. There are 5 references to light in this passage. Seven more occurred in Jn. 1:1-9.
16. John wrote the epistle we call 1st John to assure believers in Christ that they have eternal life.
17. Discuss
18. Encourage your group to think through the people they encounter who would benefit from knowing Christ.
- 19-21. Encourage the group to share

Memorize

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Special note on Baptism:

Some groups believe that a person must be baptized to be saved. They use this passage, Acts 2:38, and a handful of other verses to make their point. They're confusing images and illustrations of the grace of God for the grace of God itself. Water baptism is not essential for salvation. Consult Romans 10:9-10, Acts 16:31, Ephesians 1:13-14, 1st John 5:11-13, and etc.

Cru.Comm is the small group material for Campus Crusade for Christ's Campus Ministry. It was created by Centerfield Productions, the field based division of CruPress. We'd love to hear your feedback on this study. Please write us at centerfield@uscm.org