



Nicodemus Visits Jesus

Invitation to Abundant Life

About the Story

After hearing that Jesus turned water into wine and drove the moneychangers out of the temple with a whip, the leaders of the Jewish people understandably had some concerns about the impact of this rabble-rouser on their community! One leader, Nicodemus, was curious to know more about Jesus, but sought him at night, when his actions would not be seen by others. Jesus answers his initial question about Jesus' actions with the statement: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Frequently in John, there are two meanings to Jesus' sayings: a surface, literal meaning, and a deeper, figurative meaning. Those talking with

Jesus often understand only the surface meaning, and this is what happens with Nicodemus as he focuses on a physical re-birth. The original Greek word used here means "from above" and "again or anew" simultaneously, hinting at both a physical and a spiritual renewal.

Jesus continues with a longer teaching on what it means to be born of the Spirit, including a reference to the Son of Man being "lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). Just as Moses lifted up a snake to heal those stricken in the community, Jesus is lifted up on the cross to heal the brokenness of sin.

The third chapter of John contains perhaps the most famous Bible passage, one written on posters at sports stadiums and countless other venues—John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This is followed by a statement of Jesus' purpose in coming to earth. He came not to condemn the world (particularly those who oppose God), but to save it. This is good news! Jesus goes on from here to teach that those without belief in the Son of God already live in darkness, rather than light, because of their unbelief and separation from God, the source of light and life. When people choose evil ways, they wish to keep those deeds hidden in darkness rather than be exposed by the light. Eternal life in the Gospel of John does not only refer to everlasting life when we die; it also refers to abundant life today.

The Point:

Even those who have difficulty with Jesus' message have a place in God's story. Given the respected position Nicodemus had in his society, he faced potential censure for seeking out Jesus, someone the other religious authorities saw as a threat. Instead of reprimanding Nicodemus for his unbelief, secrecy, or slowness in understanding, the Gospel writer gives Nicodemus a place in the story. Because Nicodemus was included, we can be encouraged when we, too, experience fear, doubt, or confusion. Nicodemus' story gives all of us permission to ask questions as we wrestle with the meaning of Jesus' words and teachings.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, the Jewish authorities were confronting and interrogating Jesus openly in the temple. This week, Nicodemus, “a leader of the Jews,” comes to Jesus in secret, with questions of a less confrontational tone. Next week, we hear of the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus meets in the daylight and whose understanding and belief contrast with Nicodemus’ confusion.

Opening Prayer

Renewing God, blow your Spirit into our lives, lighting up our dark places and restoring our belief. Help us to turn our gaze to the Son of Man who has been lifted up in order to save the whole world. Grant us eternal life now and in the last days. We pray in the name of your Son, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Into the Story

John 3:16 might be the most famous verse in the Bible, and many people have this verse memorized. In a group of two to three people, answer one of the following questions:

1. Where is the strangest place you have ever seen a sign that reads “John 3:16”?
2. Do you know any other Bible verses from memory? If so, what are they?
3. Might there be other texts that would convey the gospel message? What are they?

Learning the Story

A Jewish leader comes to Jesus at night, asking questions and seeking understanding. As Jesus explains his ministry, the Pharisee becomes more confused.

Read John 3:1-10 – Born from Above

- ❓ Why do you think Nicodemus came at night? What would be the equivalent of coming “at night” in society today?
- ❓ Many people understand being “born again” to be a conversion experience. Have you ever had a conversion experience?
- ❓ What do you think it means to be born both “from above” and “again or anew” at the same time?
- ❓ What does it mean that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit? What is your understanding of the kingdom of God? Might it refer to both the present and the future?
- ❓ Jesus uses a metaphor of the wind blowing to talk about the movements of the Spirit. What are some other ways that we could try to explain our experience of the Spirit?

Bible Connections

- ✚ Jesus refers to a story of Moses raising a snake on a pole to save the people from poisonous snake bites (Numbers 21).
- ✚ Isaiah 9:2 references the Messiah as a light shining in the darkness.
- ✚ The Prologue also has themes of darkness and light (John 1).

Read John 3:11-16– Belief Leads to Life

- ❓ What are some of the ways that the Son of Man was “lifted up” in the Gospel stories?
- ❓ How do you define eternal life? On what do you base your definition?
- ❓ The Greek word for “world” refers to the whole world, and specifically, to those who opposed God. What does this fact show us about who God is? How then should we treat those who oppose us?

Read John 3:17-22 – Unbelief and Darkness

- ❓ Why do you think God sent Jesus into the world?
- ❓ How do you understand God’s judgment as described in verse 19?
- ❓ What examples of light and darkness do you see in our world?

Living the Story: Fellowship

Break into groups of four people. Each group will need a large sheet of paper and pens or pencils. Take 30 seconds to brainstorm as many words or phrases as you can about each of the following topics: Birth, Wind, Lift Up, and Darkness. Here is the trick: no one is allowed to talk!

Supplies:

- ✚ Paper
- ✚ Pens or pencils

After the 30 seconds is up, take an additional 60 seconds to talk about the ideas you wrote down. Then, share one answer and the story behind it with the larger group. Continue with brainstorming about the next word. Reflect on the process discussing questions such as: How did you feel having a deadline in which to work? Was it easier or more difficult to brainstorm without speaking aloud?

Closing Prayer

Say John 3:17 in unison: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Conclude by saying: “Save us, Lord, and restore your creation to wholeness and everlasting life. Amen.”

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Images of God

God is infinite and our language is finite, so words can never fully capture the essence of God. This means that whenever we talk about God, we use metaphors. It is important to use a variety of metaphors, since each one is incomplete and the more variety we use, the more we can understand the complexity of God. In today’s text, Jesus uses the metaphor of new birth to describe spiritual transformation. Like metaphors about God, metaphors about the spiritual life can only begin to describe something that is intangible and immeasurable.

At Home

- ✚ Ask your close friends or family if they have had a moment of transformation or a life-changing experience? Take a few moments to write down your own or another person's faith testimony.
- ✚ Watch the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and consider the behavior of Delmar after he is baptized in the river. Would you describe him as being born from above/born anew?
- ✚ The Son of Man came to save the world, even those who opposed God. Who opposes God in our world today? Say a prayer petition for every person who comes to mind.

Daily Readings**Sunday—Read John 3:1-21**

Nicodemus seeks Jesus and discovers that abundant life comes through the Son of God.

Monday—Read John 3:22-30

John the Baptist humbles himself and lifts up Jesus as the Messiah. Dip your finger into water, trace a cross on your forehead, and remember that you are a baptized child of God.

Tuesday—Read John 3:31-36

John continues to proclaim Jesus as being sent from God. Choose an additional chapter from one of the Gospels to read and reflect on today.

Wednesday—Read Luke 3:19-20

John is put into prison. Find a local prison ministry, and make cards or cookies to be sent to bring hope to those in prison.

Thursday—Read Matthew 11:2-6

John experiences a crisis of faith. Where can you turn when you doubt like John or experience a “dark night of the soul”?

Friday—Read Matthew 11:7-15

Jesus explains that John was a prophet to prepare the way for the Messiah. Look at the headlines for today and find an example of a person today who did something to “prepare the way” for the Messiah and his reign.

Saturday—Read Matthew 11:16-19

Jesus bemoans the fact that people lack understanding of the kingdom of God. Spend two minutes in silent meditation, asking God to show you areas where you might be misunderstanding God's ways.