

**PLEASE DON'T READ THESE NOTES UNTIL YOU HAVE COMPLETED YOUR LESSON.
HEARING GOD FOR YOURSELF IS WAY BETTER THAN MY COMMENTS!**

Discussion Starter

- What were you first told about where babies come from? How old were you when you heard the real story?

Introduction

After Jesus chose his disciples, changed water to wine and drove the merchants from the temple, his ministry was beginning to attract a lot of attention, both favorable and unfavorable. In John chapter 3 we find a member of *Who's Who in Jerusalem* coming to interview the "uneducated, back-country preacher" from Galilee. We don't know what Nicodemus expected to find out when he visited Jesus, but we do know that he was amazed by what Jesus told him.

Jesus conversation with Nicodemus is considered one of the most crucial passages in the Bible, containing one of the most well-known, most-often memorized verses in Scripture. There is so much to consider in this important conversation, that we will only focus on **John 3:1-21** in this lesson

Questions

1. Read **John 3:1-21**. From **3:1-2, 10**, list everything you learn about Nicodemus along with some assumptions you can make about him as a person.

The facts we are given : Nicodemus was a Pharisee (see box below); member of the Jewish ruling council (Sanhedrin – see box below); he came to meet with Jesus at night; he had observed and thought about Jesus' ministry; he was a respected Jewish teacher (Israel's teacher). Because of what we are told about him, we know he was religious and wanted to please God; he had some power because he was on the Sanhedrin; he appears to be a gentleman – he was courteous to Jesus and called him rabbi even though Jesus didn't have any formal schooling; he appears to be a careful observer and thinker because he had watched Jesus and come to the conclusion that Jesus was from God because of the miraculous signs. We also know that even though Nicodemus was a respected teacher and had a lot of Scriptural knowledge, he also had trouble grasping and understanding spiritual truth. Understanding for spiritual truth is given only by the Holy Spirit.

A member of the Jewish ruling council (3:1) – The Sanhedrin was a group of seventy elders that controlled Jewish matters in Jerusalem and that also had great moral authority throughout Palestine. The Sanhedrin included both Sadducees and Pharisees. Nicodemus was a *Pharisee*, a small but extremely influential group of men committed to strictly observing all the ordinances of Judaism concerning ritual purity as defined by tradition. They also scrupulously carried out religious duties such as tithing and the performance of ceremonial washings. By living this way, Pharisees believed they were attaining God's approval and a place in what the Jews called the world or age to come. Pharisees are generally portrayed in the Gospels as antagonists of Jesus, although a number were later converted and joined Christianity. The Apostle Paul was a *Pharisee* before he was converted.

2. What was Nicodemus' impression of Jesus (3:2)?

He called him Rabbi – which was a sign of respect considering Jesus did not have any formal schooling. He did not deny that Jesus was doing miracles and he acknowledged that Jesus must be sent by God because of these miracles. (He could have accused Jesus of doing miracles by the power of demons as some Pharisees did later.) He probably considered Jesus a prophet from God.

- ♥ Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus? *a)* To prove Jesus wrong? *b)* To get his questions answered? *c)* Sent by other Pharisees to get the scoop? *d)* To become a disciple? *e)* Other?

We are not sure of his motives, but we can speculate; he did say "**We** know you are . . . in verse 2; perhaps he was coming on the behalf of others too.

- ♥ What are some reasons why Nicodemus might have come to Jesus at *night*?

Often people say he came at night because he was afraid of being seen talking to Jesus, but there could be other good reasons too. It may be that he wanted a longer, uninterrupted, private time with Jesus; it was cooler at night or it may have been the only time Nicodemus or Jesus was free. Regardless the reason, John probably mentions the fact that they met a night to symbolically show that Nicodemus was "in the dark" and living in darkness when he came to Jesus, whether he knew it or not.

- ♥ If what Nicodemus said about Jesus in 3:2 is true, why do you think God saw it necessary to send us a teacher? What does this act say about the character of God?

We can make some inferences about God if he did send us a teacher. There must be some things we don't know that God wants us to know. These things would be best communicated through a teacher because we can't discover them for ourselves. God cared enough about us to send us a teacher to reveal his truth. The content of the teaching must be very important for God to take time and effort to send us a teacher. All in all, we see a God who loves and cares for his creation and he makes sure we have everything we need – especially his truth.

- Jesus' reply to Nicodemus in 3:3 seems rather abrupt. What question do you think Jesus saw in Nicodemus' heart?

At the end of John chapter 2, it says that Jesus knows all people and knows what is in their hearts. So, although Nicodemus was probably trying to slide into the subject carefully and politely, Jesus let Nicodemus know that he already knew what he came to talk about and what questions were in his heart. From Jesus' reply to Nicodemus' opening comments, we can assume that Nicodemus came to ask Jesus how a person can make sure they are in God's Kingdom (see box below). We know from the other Gospels that Jesus did a lot of teaching about the Kingdom of God – what it is, where it is, how one gets into it, etc. So, beside Nicodemus' Old Testament knowledge of the Scriptures, he had questions about the Kingdom of God that Jesus was teaching and preaching about.

The fact that Jesus let Nicodemus know what question was in his heart would give Jesus' answers great credibility. He demonstrated to Nicodemus that yes, he was a teacher sent from God and that yes, he did have miraculous powers because he could read Nicodemus' heart.

Kingdom of God was not a new concept for Nicodemus. The Old Testament presents the idea of God's sovereign, kingly rule over the earth. The Old Testament Scriptures also predicted a final kingdom that was coming at the end of time; a kingdom of grand dimensions ruled by a descendent of King David. Judaism taught that this was to be a future kingdom and that all Jews who faithfully kept the law would be admitted to it. Jesus, however, redefined the *kingdom of God*, teaching that it was a *spiritual kingdom* where the citizens of the kingdom were rescued from the domain of darkness by coming into the *kingdom of Light*. Jesus declared that the *kingdom of God* had arrived and he invited people to enter it. Entrance into the *kingdom of God* was not achieved by keeping God's Law, but rather by a *direct act of God* not based on race, background or culture. A person is "born" into the *kingdom of God* when they repent of sin and darkness, turning to God to receive his Life into their heart – a Life that will never end! Jesus was speaking of a spiritual birth, not a physical one, and he called it being "born again".

- In each of the following verses, what does Jesus say about *new life* and entering the *kingdom of God*?

3:3	The truth is that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again
3:5	The truth is that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit
3:6-7	Flesh (humans) reproduce human life; the Holy Spirit reproduces spiritual life; You must be born again.

♥ How is Jesus' use of the words *born again* similar to and different from the way it is used today? A good question to discuss. The term "born again" is not always viewed positively in our culture. Why is that? What has happened? It good to remember that it was Jesus who first used this term and we should look to him for the definition.

5. Read 3:3 in the *Amplified* version. What are two other terms for *born again*? Which term makes the most sense to you? Why?

Born anew or born from above. Discuss whether these phrases carry the same connotations that *born again* carries in our culture. A very literal translation of the original language would be "born from above."

Born of water and the Spirit (3:5) – Many explanations have been given for what Jesus meant by *water* when he said no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of *water* and the Spirit. Probably the best explanation is to look at this phrase through the eyes of Nicodemus. How would he have understood Jesus' statement? Probably the first thing Nicodemus would have thought of was John the Baptist's water baptism. People had been going to John the Baptist in droves to be baptized as a sign of *repentance* for sins. (Christian baptism had not yet been established.) Jesus was telling Nicodemus that repentance of sin was the necessary first step to spiritual rebirth.

♥ Nicodemus was surprised at Jesus' strong statement in 3:7. What is your reaction to this statement? Jesus didn't leave any wiggle room; he says you **MUST** be born again. Not only did Nicodemus not understand what Jesus meant by being born again, he was also being told it was not a necessity if he wanted to enter the Kingdom of God.

♥ Why is **new birth**, and not just a **right mental belief** or a **religious lifestyle**, necessary for seeing and entering God's kingdom?

Spiritual birth is an inner change where our spirits come alive with the life of God. We become new creations of persons. We receive new life that was not there before (2 Corinthians 5:17). Mental beliefs or religious actions do not bring heart change or new life. Only the Holy Spirit can work from the inside out. If a person does not have the life of God in them, then they are spiritually dead no matter what they intellectually believe or what lifestyle they live.

♥ What point was Jesus making by comparing spiritual birth to ordinary *wind* (3:8)?

Probably the night winds were blowing when Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, so it became a good object lesson of how the Holy Spirit works. In fact, the Greek word for "spirit" and "wind" are identical. The context determines what meaning the word has. So, Jesus was saying the Spirit (not just the wind) blows wherever He pleases. You can't understand where He is coming from or where he is going, but there is no mistaking that he is working. You can see and feel the effects of the Holy Spirit (just as with the wind), even though you can't explain HOW He works (or how the winds works). We may not be able to explain exactly how the Spirit gives us new life, but there is no mistaking that He does! We see and feel the effects of the new birth in us.

♥ Imagine what Nicodemus might have felt after hearing the words Jesus spoke in 3:10-12. When was a time you felt this way after hearing spiritual truth? When did you finally "get it"?

6. List several things Jesus was claiming about himself in 3:12-15.

- He was claiming to know heavenly truth (what is going on in heaven) because he came from heaven
- He said that his coming from heaven was the only way he would know this truth. God's truth can only be learned by revelation (it being revealed or told) and not by discovery (our discovering or figuring it out.)
- He predicted that he would be "lifted up" or die (The expression "lifted up" in this Gospel always refers to the cross)
- He claimed that through his death (being lifted up) he would give eternal life (the never-ending life of God) to anyone who believed in him
- He was basically claiming to be God

7. When Nicodemus found it hard to understand what Jesus was trying to teach him, Jesus, the consummate teacher, used an illustration from Old Testament Scriptures (which Nicodemus knew very well) that would help explain the truth he was teaching. Read **Numbers 21:4-9**. How does this story explain **John 3:14-15**?

After God delivered the Hebrew people from Egypt in a miraculous way, the people sinned by complaining the refusing to trust God. God sent biting, poisonous snakes among the people and many died. The others came to Moses and repented. God told Moses to put a snake up on a pole (a cross-like banner) and anyone who looked at the snake as a tangible sign of repentance (admitting they were wrong) and faith (that they believed what God said) was healed.

By drawing this parallel, Jesus predicted His death and the spiritual healing that will come when anyone looks to Him and believes in Him. Just as the serpent was a sign of sin, so Christ was made to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21) when he died in our place. When sinners acknowledge that Christ became sin for them, that is an act of repentance and belief that results in healing and new life.

Other parallels:

- The serpent was God's idea; it saved those condemned of sin and suffering side effects
- The serpent was lifted up on a "banner staff" much like a cross
- The sufferer's didn't do anything but look at the serpent
- The destiny of the individual who was suffering depended on his response to God's invitation to look

This Old Testament story would have been very familiar to Nicodemus. Jewish scholars spent the larger part of each day in the study of Scripture and often memorized not only the Pentateuch (first 5 books of OT), but the entire Old Testament.

♥ Why is the word "must" in **3:14** important?

The word "must" shows that there is no other way to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life (see box below). This is why Jesus **MUST** be lifted up.

Discuss with your group the difference between biological life and eternal life:

Eternal life – God is the source of all life and all life is derived from him. As Creator, God is the source of biological life, but when John speaks of *eternal life*, he does not use the Greek word for biological life. Rather, he uses the Greek word *zoe* which means *God's own life*. *Eternal life* stands in contrast to biological life. Biological life is fleeting and has no shaping impact on the personality. *Eternal life*, however, is not only endless, it also contains God's *vitality* and *character*. The wonderful message of the Gospel is that God has chosen to share this life – to share himself – with human beings! The Bible always links *eternal life* with Jesus. It is only through faith in the Son of God that a person receives eternal life (**3:36**). This new life begins now, and continues after we die physically. Receiving God's life **dramatically changes us**, our **relationship to God** and our **relationship to others**. We are born again or born anew! Jesus said, "I have come that so that you might have life (*zoe*), and have it to the full! Do you possess *eternal life*?"

8. Many people understand **John 3:16** to be the key verse in the entire Bible. Use this verse to fill in the chart below:

The Giver:	God
The Gift:	God's one and only (unique) Son
Motivation behind Gift:	Love
Recipients of Gift:	Whoever believes in the one and only Son
Benefit to Recipients:	Shall not perish (come to destruction, be lost) but have eternal life (God's life)

♥ What do you like best about God's plan?

- ♥ Compare the message of **John 3:16** with **Romans 5:8** and **1 John 4:9-10**. Why do you think so many people in the world don't believe this message?

Clearly, God's motivation is providing eternal life for us is LOVE. Discuss with your group why some people reject this offer of love. Some may not want to admit they are sinners or that they can't earn a way to God themselves. Others may think it's too good to be true or don't have a way to experience God's love. Others may be blinded by what they see in other "Christians" who don't reflect God's love to others. The list goes on . . .

- ♥ Who is the world (**3:16**)? Does God still love the world? Why or why not?

In the Gospel of John, "world" (***kosmos***) is used 78 times. It is not a reference to the natural world of trees, animals, plants and nature. World is the realm of humanity that is in opposition to God. The ***world*** is hostile to God. It loves darkness rather than light because it's deeds are evil. When Jesus entered the world, he knew that it was hostile and that a sacrificial death would be needed in order to redeem the world. The Son did not come to save a select few from the world, but he died for and desires to save all the world.

It is interesting to note that Christ-followers are NOT to love the world (1 Jn. 2:15-17) because it is a place of disbelief and hostility (John 15:18-19; 16:8). Is it a contradiction that God loves the world but we are not to love the world? Christians are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation. God loves the world with a the selfless, costly love of redemption. We are to hate the world (world system that is hostile to God), but we are to love our neighbor (individuals in the world).

God still loves the world and longs to redeem it. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. That hasn't changed.

9. According to **3:17**, why did God send Jesus, his Son, into the world?
To save it (redeem or buy it back)

- ♥ Many people associate God with **condemnation** and **judgment**. Why do you think people have this concept of God? **A good question to discuss**

10. If someone said to you, "But God is too good and loving to eternally condemn anyone", how could you use **3:18, 20** and **36** in reply?

Clearly, it is not God that condemns us; it is our unbelief and the refusal of accepting God's offer of life that condemns us. God will not force us; the choice is ours. Choices, however, have consequences.

11. Read **John 3:19-21**. The difference between the believer and the unbeliever does not lie in the guilt or innocence of either; it lies in the different attitudes they take toward the light from heaven. Why does the unbeliever shrink from the light (**3:19-20**)?

A person shrinks from the light because light reveals the truth about actions and motives. We can hide things from others and even ourselves, but when God's light comes into a situation, everything is exposed. A person who doesn't want to change, does not want their deeds and motives exposed.

- Why does the believer come into the light (**3:21 Amplified**)?

A believer is not afraid of the light because it will expose the fact that everything good about them is a work of God in their life. God gets the credit. They are not afraid of the light exposing wrong actions and motives, because God offers forgiveness and cleansing for sin to anyone who has believed on Jesus and accepted his sacrifice for their sins.

How comfortable do you feel walking into the light? Why?

♥ How does **1 John 1:8-9** relate to light-haters and light-lovers?

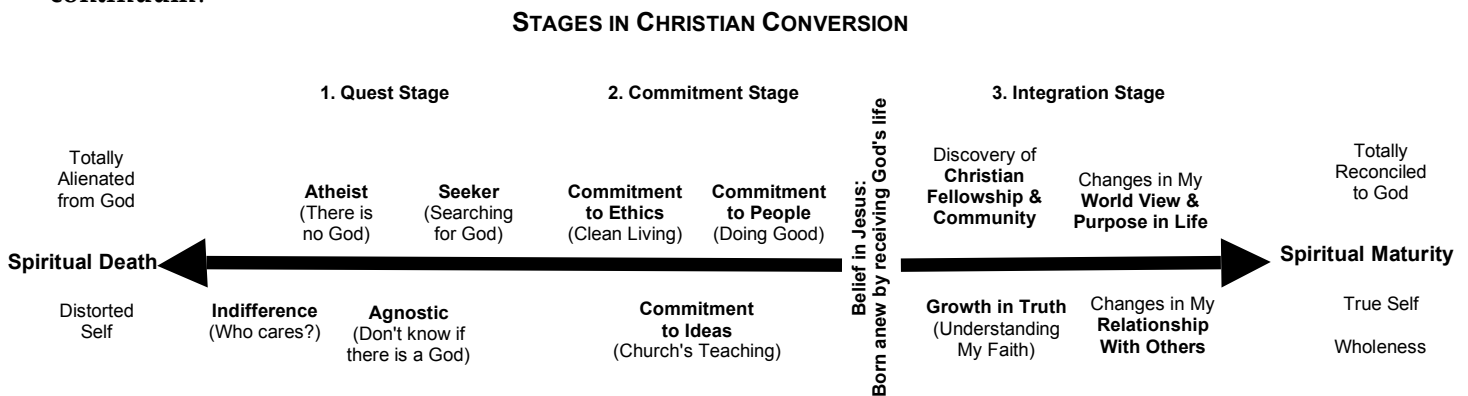
Confessing our sin is admitting that we have done wrong and it is seeing our sin as God sees it. This is what coming into the light means. This is not a fearful thing for the one who belongs to Jesus because it means we can be forgiven, cleansed and given a new beginning. Light-haters don't want to be exposed because they don't want to admit they have done wrong or they don't want to give up, for self-centered and self-protective reasons, their patterns of behavior.

♥ Do you think Nicodemus came into the light or ran from the light? What might be some reasons why we are not told for sure?

response

Here is the great paradox, the two-edged meaning of Jesus coming into the world. He came **in love** to save, to heal, and to offer new life by spiritual birth. He did **not** come to condemn or judge. **But, his coming does force the issue.** Once light comes and exposes the darkness, everyone must make a decision. Will they stay in darkness or walk into the light? There is no middle ground. Either we have the life of God in us or we don't. Either our sins are forgiven or they are not. Either our belief sets us free or our unbelief condemns us.

Graciously, God leads us to the point of decision and that leading becomes our *spiritual journey*. Even though each of us has a different story, there often seems to be many similarities in our journeys. Below are some examples of the stages that one may go through in their journey to Christ. You may or may not have gone through all, some or none of these stages, **but where would you mark yourself today on the continuum?**



Ask your group: Are there any stages on the chart that you do recall going through in your spiritual journey? Use the chart below to share some of your spiritual journey with your small group. We are encouraged when we hear each other's stories!

For those who want to accept God's offer of eternal life, it is as simple as acknowledging before God (in prayer) that we are sinners and we are ready to repent (admit and turn away) from our sin. We acknowledge that Jesus took our individual sins upon himself and died in our place. We accept his sacrifice and believe in what he has done by inviting him into our heart and life. He will accept our invitation, he will forgive and cleanse us of sin and the Holy Spirit will birth in us the life of God. Remember that Jesus said this process was like the wind – we may not understand how it happens, but it is real and we are born anew! Father, Son and Holy Spirit take up residence IN us and will never leave us. We now have the power of God in us to love God and others. We also have the power make real and lasting changes in our lives, from the inside out. The very life of God (zoe) lives in us forever!