



## LESSON 3 ~ A NEW BEGINNING

John 3

### 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.

### PREPARATION

1. Before you read **John 3**, ask the **Holy Spirit to teach you and guide you into all truth (John 16:13)**. You may want to make the following prayer your own:

*Spirit of the Living God, the One who comforts, strengthens and encourages me.*

*I admit that I cannot understand the truth found in God's Word with only my mind.*

*I agree that spiritual truth has to be understood with my heart as well as my head.*

*So I ask You to give me spiritual understanding as I do this lesson.*

*I pray that You would enable me to see, hear and understand,  
with my spirit, all that You want to teach me.*

*I ask this in the powerful Name of Jesus (as if Jesus were asking it).*

*Amen*

2. Read **John 3** slowly and thoughtfully in your own Bible. As you read and reread, **underline or highlight** any verses, phrases or words that are meaningful to you. Put a **question mark** beside anything you don't understand. Put a ✓ beside anything you would like more information about.

**You may also want to read this chapter in another translation.** The Scripture handouts for these lessons contain the *Amplified Version* of the Bible. It is important, however, that you don't try to answer the questions in the lesson from just the *Amplified Version*. The questions are phrased to be answered from the *New International Version (NIV)*, the *New Living Translation (NLT)*, or something similar. Using **only** the *Amplified Version* may be confusing. It is given only as a supplementary text.

3. Write one question that you have about this chapter that you would like answered as you do 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.

*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**)?

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

3. Jesus' reply to Nicodemus in **3:3** seems rather abrupt. What question do you think Jesus saw in 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".

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

3:3	
3:5	
3:6-7	

- ♥ How is Jesus' use of the words *born again* similar to and different from the way it is used today?
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 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 or *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?
  - ♥ Why is **new birth**, and not just a **right mental belief** or a **religious lifestyle**, necessary for seeing and entering God's kingdom?
  - ♥ What point was Jesus making by comparing spiritual birth to ordinary *wind* (3:8)?
  - ♥ 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.

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**?

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

**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:

<b>The Giver:</b>	
<b>The Gift:</b>	
<b>Motivation behind Gift:</b>	
<b>Recipients of Gift:</b>	
<b>Benefit to Recipients:</b>	

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

9. According to **3:17**, why did God send Jesus, his Son, into the world?

♥ Many people associate God with **condemnation** and **judgment**. Why do you think people have this concept of God?

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?

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**)?

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

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

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

♥ 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?** Are there any stages on the chart that you do recall going through in your spiritual journey? If you would like, 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!

