

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: You Must Be Born Again: Jesus and Nicodemus

John 3:1–21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 3:1–21 contains some of the most precious and most contested verses in the Bible, and it must be handled with both warmth and care. Doctrinally, this passage is about the new birth: how a person enters the kingdom of God. Jesus is unmistakably clear that entrance is not by religious pedigree, knowledge, or moral effort, but by being “born again,” “born of water and the Spirit.” The teacher should be ready to present the new birth in line with the whole New Testament plan of salvation, the new life that comes as the gospel is believed, sin is repented of, Christ is confessed, and the believer is baptized into Him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Titus 3:5). It is vital not to reduce “belief” to bare mental assent and not to drift into salvation by faith only, which the broader testimony of Scripture excludes (James 2:24).

At the same time, this passage beats with the heart of the gospel: “God so loved the world.” The new birth is not a cold doctrine but the overflow of God’s love, the offer of life to the perishing. Nicodemus, with all his religion, needed to be made new, and so do we. The teacher should let students feel both the seriousness of Jesus’ “you must” and the tenderness of “God so loved.” The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, where the nature of saving faith is at stake.

So aim at both the truth and the heart. Send students home clear about how a person is born again and saved, and send them home moved by the love that makes it possible. The disciple we are forming both understands the new birth and is living, gladly, out of it.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). What does it mean to be “born again,” and why does Jesus insist that no amount of religious knowledge or moral effort can substitute for it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students feel the shock of Jesus’ words to a man like Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a respected teacher. If anyone had earned a place in the kingdom by religious credentials, it was Nicodemus. And Jesus tells him he must start over completely: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Define the new birth carefully. To be born again (the word also means “born from above”) is to receive new life from God, a fundamental re-creation, not a reformation. It is the difference

between fixing up an old life and receiving a new one. Nicodemus's confusion, picturing a second physical birth, shows how radical the idea is. Jesus is not talking about trying harder; He is talking about being made new.

Stress why religious effort cannot substitute. Knowledge can inform, morality can restrain, religion can shape behavior, but none of these can produce spiritual life where there was death. The new birth is something God does in us as we respond to the gospel. This humbles the religious and gives hope to the worst sinner alike, because both need the same new birth.

Hold the balance the rest of the lesson will develop: the new birth is God's gift, not our achievement, and it is received through a genuine, obedient response to the gospel. Establish here that no one enters the kingdom by being respectable; everyone enters by being born again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new birth as re-creation, not self-improvement (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17).
- The insufficiency of religious knowledge, status, or morality for entering the kingdom.
- The universal necessity of the new birth for every person ("you must").
- The new birth as God's work received through an obedient response to the gospel.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was it so startling for Jesus to tell Nicodemus he must be born again?
- What is the difference between reforming an old life and receiving a new one?
- Why can no amount of religion substitute for the new birth?

Question 2

Student Question:

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, cautiously, perhaps afraid of what others would think (v. 2). Where in your life are you tempted to keep your faith quiet or hidden, and what would it look like to come into the light?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the detail that Nicodemus came "by night" (v. 2). Whatever his reasons, fear, caution, the desire to protect his reputation, he approached Jesus under cover of darkness. The contrast with the "light" later in the chapter is surely intentional.

Invite students to consider where they keep their own faith quiet or hidden. For some it is at work, where speaking of Christ feels risky. For others it is among certain family or friends, or online, or in any setting where following Jesus might cost them standing. The fear of what others think is a powerful, common pressure.

Note that Nicodemus's story does not end in the dark. He will later defend Jesus before the council (7:50–51) and help bury Him openly (19:39). Coming to the light is often a journey, not a single leap. This encourages students who feel they have been hiding: the same Jesus who met Nicodemus in the night will lead them into the light.

Press toward one concrete step into the light, a word spoken, an identification made, a fear faced. The aim is not reckless display but honest, unashamed identification with Christ in the specific place where it has felt safer to stay hidden.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to hide our faith out of fear of others' opinions.
- Coming to the light as an honest, often gradual, identification with Christ.
- Nicodemus's later boldness as encouragement for the timid.
- The call to confess Christ openly rather than secretly (Matthew 10:32–33).

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to keep your faith hidden?
- What fear keeps you in the dark in that area?
- What is one step into the light you could take this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (v. 5). How do the Scriptures elsewhere help us understand what it means to be born of water and the Spirit, and how does this connect to the way the New Testament describes coming to Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the most important verses in the lesson, and the teacher should handle it with confidence and clarity. Jesus says, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." The question is what "water" refers to. Read in the light of the whole New Testament, the most natural and consistent understanding ties this to the new birth that comes as a believing, repentant person is baptized into Christ, with the Spirit at work to make them new.

Show how the rest of the New Testament fills this out. On the day of Pentecost, when convicted hearers asked what to do, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Paul says in baptism we are buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–4). Titus 3:5 speaks of salvation "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Water and Spirit appear together, just as in John 3:5.

Tie it back to Ezekiel, which Nicodemus the teacher should have known. Ezekiel 36:25–27 promised a day when God would sprinkle clean water to cleanse His people and put His Spirit within them to give a new heart. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that this promised renewal is now arriving, the cleansing and the new Spirit together. This is why Jesus marvels that the teacher of Israel did not understand.

Guard against two errors. First, do not detach the new birth from baptism, as if water here means something merely symbolic and optional, since the New Testament consistently joins faith, repentance, confession, and baptism in the one response to the gospel. Second, do not turn baptism into a mere external rite that works apart from faith and the Spirit's renewing work; it is water and Spirit together, an obedient faith in which God makes the believer new. The point for students is the wholeness of the gospel response, not a single isolated act.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Born of water and the Spirit understood through the whole New Testament (John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5).
- Baptism as the God-appointed point at which the believing, repentant person is born into Christ (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27).
- The Spirit's renewing work joined with the water, not water alone as a mere ritual.
- The fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:25–27 in the new birth Jesus describes.
- The wholeness of the gospel response: faith, repentance, confession, and baptism.

Discussion Prompts

- How do passages like Acts 2:38 and Romans 6:3–4 help us understand “water and the Spirit”?
- Why should we keep faith, repentance, confession, and baptism together rather than picking one?
- How does Ezekiel 36 shed light on what Jesus told Nicodemus?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus contrasts the flesh and the Spirit and says, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6). Where do you see yourself still trying to live the Christian life in your own strength rather than by the Spirit's work, and what needs to change?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Jesus' contrast in verse 6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The new life is not produced or sustained by the flesh, our natural strength and effort, but by the Spirit.

Help students recognize the subtle, exhausting habit of living the Christian life in their own strength. We are born again by the Spirit, and then we quietly revert to white-knuckle effort, trying to be good enough, manufacturing change by willpower, measuring ourselves by performance. This is living by the flesh even in religious clothing.

Draw the contrast with life by the Spirit. The same Spirit who gives the new birth also empowers the new life (Galatians 5:16–25). Growth in Christ is not mainly a matter of trying harder but of walking in step with the Spirit, depending on Him, yielding to Him, drawing on the life He supplies.

Press toward a concrete shift. Ask each student to name one area where they have been striving in the flesh, perhaps battling a sin by willpower alone, or serving from duty rather than from the Spirit's life, and to consider what depending on the Spirit would look like there instead. The aim is to move from self-powered religion to Spirit-empowered life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between the flesh and the Spirit (John 3:6; Galatians 5:16–25).
- The Spirit as the source not only of new birth but of ongoing new life.
- The futility of living the Christian life by willpower alone.
- Growth through dependence on the Spirit rather than self-effort.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you trying to live the Christian life in your own strength?
- What is the difference between striving in the flesh and walking by the Spirit?
- What would depending on the Spirit look like in that specific area?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus compares the Spirit to the wind, which “blows where it wishes” (v. 8). What does this teach us about the Spirit’s work in the new birth, and how does it balance God’s initiative with the response He calls us to make?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus uses the image of the wind to describe the Spirit: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (v. 8). The same word means both wind and Spirit, and the image is rich.

Draw out God’s initiative. The new birth is the work of the Spirit, not something we engineer or fully comprehend. We do not manufacture spiritual life any more than we command the wind. This humbles us and keeps us from boasting; salvation begins with God reaching for us.

At the same time, be careful to keep the biblical balance. The wind imagery does not teach that God arbitrarily regenerates some and bypasses others apart from any response, as in the Calvinistic doctrine of irresistible grace. The same passage that speaks of the Spirit's mysterious work also says "whoever believes" (vv. 15–16) and calls people to come to the light (v. 21). God draws genuinely and the call is real and universal; people are truly able to respond.

Help students hold both truths. We cannot save ourselves, and we do not understand all the Spirit's working, yet God's gracious call comes to all and invites a real response. The mystery of the wind does not cancel the command to believe and obey; it assures us that behind our response stands the gracious, life-giving work of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Spirit's mysterious, sovereign work in the new birth (John 3:8).
- God's gracious initiative in salvation, which humbles human pride.
- A scriptural balance against irresistible grace and unconditional election.
- The genuine, universal gospel call that people are truly able to answer (John 3:15–16; Revelation 22:17).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the image of the wind teach about the Spirit's work?
- How does this passage hold together God's initiative and our response?
- Why is it important that the gospel call is real and offered to all?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus marvels that Nicodemus, "the teacher of Israel," did not understand these things (v. 10). Are there truths you have known about for years without letting them truly change you? What is one such truth God may be asking you to finally live?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus expresses gentle astonishment: "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (v. 10). Nicodemus had the Scriptures, including Ezekiel's promise of water and Spirit, yet he had never let them lead him to the new birth they described. He knew much and understood little.

Turn this toward the student. It is entirely possible to know the Bible well, to have heard the truth for decades, and yet to have never truly let it change us. Familiarity can breed a strange blindness, where the most important truths become so well-worn that they no longer move us.

Invite honest reflection on truths long known but never lived. Perhaps it is forgiveness, which the student can define but will not extend. Perhaps it is the call to generosity, or purity, or to lay

down a grudge, or to actually rest in grace. Knowing is not the same as doing, and Jesus is after the doing.

Press for one such truth. Ask each student to name a truth they have known about for years and to consider what it would mean to finally live it, this week, in some concrete way. The aim is to close the gap between the head and the life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of knowing truth without being changed by it (James 1:22).
- Familiarity as a subtle enemy of obedience.
- The difference between mastering information and being transformed.
- The call to move long-known truths from the head to the life.

Discussion Prompts

- What truth have you known for years without truly living it?
- Why can familiarity make us blind to important truths?
- What is one long-known truth you will act on this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14–15). How does the bronze serpent of Numbers 21 picture the cross, and what does it teach about how we are saved?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus reaches back to a strange story in Numbers 21. When the people were dying from snakebites, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole; everyone who looked at it lived. Jesus says, “So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14–15).

Unfold the picture. The lifting up points to the cross, where Jesus would be lifted up to die. Just as the dying Israelites had to look at the bronze serpent to live, so the perishing must look in faith to the crucified Christ to be saved. The cure was not in their effort but in God’s appointed remedy, lifted up before them.

Stress what this teaches about salvation. It is God’s provision, not our achievement. The Israelites did not heal themselves; they looked and lived. So salvation comes by looking to Christ crucified, trusting in what God has provided. This guards against any notion that we save ourselves by our own goodness.

At the same time, note that looking was a real, active response. They had to turn and look; they could have refused. This pictures the living faith the gospel calls for, a faith that genuinely responds to God's provision. The remedy is all of grace, and it must be received. Connect this to the cross we remember at the Lord's table, the Son of Man lifted up for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The bronze serpent as a type of Christ lifted up on the cross (Numbers 21; John 3:14).
- Salvation as God's provision received by faith, not human achievement.
- Looking to Christ as a real, responsive act of faith.
- The cross as the center of God's saving work.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the bronze serpent picture the cross of Christ?
- What does this story teach about how we are saved?
- How is looking to Christ both wholly of grace and a real response?

Question 8

Student Question:

John 3:16 says God gave His Son "that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." How does this verse comfort you personally, and how does it move you to share that same love with someone who is still perishing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John 3:16 may be the most familiar verse in the Bible, and the teacher's task is to keep it from becoming a slogan and let it land afresh. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Help students hear the personal comfort. The verse begins with the love of God, vast enough to embrace the whole world and personal enough to include each one of them. God did not merely feel love; He gave, and what He gave was His one and only Son. The measure of His love is the gift He was willing to make.

Address the weight of "should not perish." The verse assumes a real danger: people are perishing. The love of God is not sentimental; it is rescue. This keeps the comfort from becoming cheap. God's love meets us in real peril and offers real deliverance into eternal life.

Then turn the comfort outward. The same verse that comforts us should move us. If God so loved the world that He gave His Son, then those who have received that love cannot be indifferent to the people around them who are still perishing. Invite students to let John 3:16 become not only their assurance but their motivation, naming one person they long to see come to that same love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The love of God as the source of salvation (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).
- The costliness of God's gift: His only Son.
- The reality of perishing and the rescue God offers.
- Received love as the motive for sharing the gospel.

Discussion Prompts

- How does John 3:16 comfort you personally?
- What does it cost God to love the world the way this verse describes?
- Who is one person you long to see receive this same love?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus says that whoever does not believe "is condemned already" and that people loved "the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (vv. 18–20). How does this passage define saving belief, and how would you explain, from the whole New Testament, that the faith Jesus calls for is a living, obedient faith expressed in repentance, confession, and baptism, rather than mere mental agreement or salvation by faith only?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and the teacher should give it the most care. The passage speaks of belief and unbelief in the starkest terms: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already" (v. 18), and people "loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (v. 19). The key question is what kind of belief saves.

Define saving belief from the text and the whole New Testament. The belief Jesus calls for here is not bare mental agreement that Jesus exists or is impressive. Notice that John ties belief directly to deeds and to the light: those who refuse to believe also refuse to come to the light, while "whoever does what is true comes to the light" (v. 21). Saving faith and obedient response belong together. As James says plainly, "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24), and faith without works is dead (James 2:17, 26).

Lay out how the New Testament describes this living faith taking hold of Christ. The same gospel of John that says "whoever believes" also records that genuine faith confesses Christ openly (Romans 10:9–10), repents of sin (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38), and is baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; Galatians 3:26–27). Jesus Himself said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). The believing of John 3 is the living, obedient faith the whole Gospel describes, not a one-time mental decision or a sinner's prayer that leaves the life unchanged.

Be clear and kind about what we are guarding against. We reject “faith only” not because we minimize faith but because Scripture does not isolate faith from the response it produces. We reject the idea that salvation is secured by a single private prayer apart from the obedience of faith. And we reject reducing belief to intellectual assent, since even the demons believe and shudder (James 2:19). True faith trusts Christ enough to obey Him.

Then bring it back to the heart, so this does not become a cold checklist. The whole point of the plan of salvation is union with the Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us. Faith, repentance, confession, and baptism are the way a loving God has appointed for the perishing to take hold of His Son and be born again. Help students see obedience not as earning but as the glad embrace of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saving faith as a living, obedient trust, not mere mental assent (James 2:17–26).
- The biblical plan of salvation: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 10:9–10; Mark 16:16; Galatians 3:26–27).
- A clear rejection of salvation by faith only and of the sinner’s prayer as a substitute for the gospel response.
- Belief joined to coming to the light and doing what is true (John 3:19–21).
- Obedience as the glad embrace of grace, not a means of earning salvation.
- Union with the loving Christ as the goal of the whole plan of salvation.

Discussion Prompts

- How would you explain the difference between mental assent and saving faith?
- How does the New Testament describe the way a believing person takes hold of Christ?
- Why do faith, repentance, confession, and baptism belong together as one response?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this conversation, from “you must be born again” to “God so loved the world.” What is one specific way Jesus is calling you to live out of your new birth, walking in the light rather than the darkness, this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks students to take in the whole sweep of the conversation, from the sober “you must be born again” to the tender “God so loved the world” to the closing contrast between light and darkness. The aim is to move from understanding the new birth to living out of it.

Help students see that the new birth is not only an entrance but a way of life. The chapter ends by describing two kinds of people: those who love darkness and avoid the light because of their deeds, and those who “do what is true” and come to the light. The born-again life is a life increasingly lived in the light.

Make it concrete. Ask each student where they are still living in some pocket of darkness, a hidden habit, a relationship handled dishonestly, an area kept from the light, and what it would mean to walk in the light there this week. Walking in the light includes honesty, repentance, and openness before God and trusted others.

Close by linking the new birth to love. We walk in the light not to earn God’s love but because we have been born again into it. The same God who so loved the world has made us new and now calls us to live as children of light. Let students leave both assured of their new birth and stirred to live it out gladly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new birth as the beginning of a life lived in the light (John 3:21; 1 John 1:7).
- Walking in the light as honesty, repentance, and openness before God.
- Obedience flowing from new life rather than earning it.
- Concrete, specific application as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to live out of your new birth day by day?
- Where are you still living in a pocket of darkness?
- What is one way you will walk in the light this week?