



Everyone Who Believes

Jesus offers eternal life to all who believe in Him.

JOHN 3:4-18

A new year represents a fresh start. This is the day we start that new diet; the day we begin to finish that project; the day we take that first step toward completing a 5k run without walking. This is a new year with no history or regrets. Jesus told Nicodemus that his life could be characterized by newness if he would believe in Him.

What do you most look forward to with the start of a new year?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

JOHN 3:1-36

John 3 is one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament, primarily because it contains the gospel in a sentence (John 3:16). Similarly, most believers know something about Nicodemus and his nighttime discussion with Jesus. Unfortunately, familiarity sometimes causes readers to overlook details of this encounter, limiting their comprehension of important truths.

Coming to see Jesus, Nicodemus thought he was offering a compliment by acknowledging that Jesus was acting under God's direction. Jesus needed no human affirmation. Instead, He focused the conversation on Nicodemus's need for a right relationship with God.

Jesus had a way of turning statements back on the speaker. Using the phrase "born again," he roused the Pharisee's inquisitiveness and simply but profoundly addressed several vital truths. First, human beings must experience a spiritual rebirth to have a right relationship with God. Second, faith in God's Son is the only way people can undergo such transformation. Third, without being born again, each person remains condemned. Fourth, Jesus did not come to condemn; people were already condemned because of unbelief. Finally, Jesus came so everyone who believes in Him might be saved.

The scene suddenly changes in the second half of this chapter, but the theme remains the same. Jesus and His disciples moved into the Judean countryside near the place where John the Baptist was baptizing. John's disciples were concerned that more people were following Jesus than John. Rather than being threatened by this news, John explained that his preaching prepared the way for Jesus the Messiah. John admonished his followers for concentrating on the earthly rather than the heavenly. Jesus was the One who came from above. He alone can give eternal life.

Read John 3:4-18, identifying the order of the points being made by Jesus. How does each point made lead to the conclusion that all who fail to believe in Jesus have already been judged?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BORN AGAIN? (JOHN 3:4-8)

⁴ “How can anyone be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked him. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. ⁸ The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

VERSES 4-8

Nicodemus was a good man and a religious man—one with a firm understanding of the Old Testament. A man could not become a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin if he were otherwise (v. 1). Referring to Jesus as “Rabbi” showed that he was respectful. By saying he was aware of the signs (or miracles) Jesus had done, Nicodemus indicated he knew at least something about Jesus (v. 2).

For Nicodemus to come to Jesus about religious matters would have been completely unheard of in first-century Jewish culture. Why would a Pharisee come to a carpenter who was an itinerant preacher? This would be like a banker asking a kid who ran a lemonade stand for financial advice. This meeting was evidence that in spite of all of Nicodemus’s achievements and honors, something was still missing—something deep inside.

Although Nicodemus had not asked a question, “Jesus replied” (v. 3). Jesus responded to Nicodemus’s heart and mind rather than his words. He understood Nicodemus’s concern and need.

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom*

The Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ. (See Luke 18:15-17; Colossians 1:13.)

Jesus explained that to **enter the kingdom of God** a person had to be “born again” (v. 3). This would have been shocking news for Nicodemus. His questions in verse 4 reveal he did not understand what Jesus was saying; he was applying what Jesus said to a physical birth rather than a spiritual one.

BIBLE SKILL: *Identify the imagery in a verse or passage and discover what it communicates.*

Compare John 3 with 1 Peter 1:23 and 1 John 5:1. How does being born spiritually convey the idea of spiritual transformation? Compare this passage. How is being born of God linked to faith in Christ and love for God? How does the picture of the new birth help you grasp the relationship believers share with the Heavenly Father

Having heard Nicodemus’s questions, Jesus explained further. In doing so, He used the phrase **born of water and the Spirit** as a parallel to being born again or from above. In mentioning *water*, Jesus was pointing back to the Old Testament, which linked water and the Spirit to being spiritually cleansed and having a new heart and new spirit placed in an obedient follower of God (Ezek. 36:25-27).

Jesus next contrasted the two births, the physical (**born of the flesh**) and the spiritual (**born of the Spirit**). When John’s Gospel speaks about *flesh*, it refers to that which is mortal, frail, and created from dust. Paul used the same terminology to describe human sinful nature (Rom. 7:4-20). When John wrote about being born of the *Spirit*, he was referring to the eternal, powerful, and transformative presence of God in a person. This state cannot come about by human effort or achievement; it only comes from above.

In verse 7, Jesus reiterated His earlier statement, but in doing so used a plural pronoun, **you must be born again**. Thus, this requirement for a new birth applied not only to Nicodemus but to all the Pharisees and Sanhedrin, all the Jews, and all humanity.

Jesus then compared this new birth to wind. The Greek word Jesus used can be interpreted as both Spirit and wind; thus Jesus was making a play on words. He was employing a common experience to describe how the **Spirit** works. The phrase **so it is** connected a natural phenomenon with **everyone born of the Spirit**. One might not be able to determine where, when, or how the Holy Spirit accomplishes His work, but evidence of the result abounds.

No one can enter God's kingdom by human effort or natural means. God's Spirit moves within the human spirit to convince us that we are sinners. He illumines Scriptures and magnifies Jesus as God's Son who died and rose again. As we respond in repentance and faith, God accomplishes that mysterious act of salvation and we can be born again.

What do people find confusing about salvation coming through faith in Jesus alone?

HOW? (JOHN 3:9-13)

⁹ **“How can these things be?”** asked Nicodemus. ¹⁰ **“Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?”** Jesus replied. ¹¹ **“Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony.** ¹² **If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?** ¹³ **No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven — the Son of Man.**

VERSES 9-13

Nicodemus's first question was, “How can anyone be born when he is old?” (v. 4). Indicating he still did not understand what Jesus was saying, he next asked, ***How can these things be?***

Certainly for years Nicodemus had taught principles related to being part of the kingdom—this included obeying the Law, keeping the commandments, observing the feasts and traditions, praying often and properly, demonstrating piety, and attending worship at

the temple. Those actions would help an observant Jew to be ready for the kingdom and the judgment to come. Nicodemus believed one's righteous works and achievements made a person right with God. Jesus, though, was teaching something radically different. What was necessary was for a person to be born from above.

How might Nicodemus's religious heritage and training have hindered him from understanding what Jesus meant?

Jesus believed Nicodemus should have understood what He was saying. The Old Testament had several verses that linked God's Spirit and water with new life (Isa. 32:15-20; 44:3-4; Ezek. 39:29). Interestingly, beginning with verse 11, we do not hear further from Nicodemus. Thus, John's emphasis was not on the Pharisee or his questions but on Jesus's words and **testimony**.

In verse 13, Jesus explained why His words were uniquely reliable. No other human had ever been to the heavenly realm, known heavenly things from personal experience, and come from the heavenly realm—except **the Son of Man** Himself. The verb tense John used in stating Jesus **descended from heaven** indicates a unique event in history. This points back to Jesus, the Word, existing from eternity past, becoming flesh, and dwelling in our midst (1:1-14). This uniqueness set Jesus apart, affirmed the fact He was (and is) the Messiah, and serves as the basis for our being able to trust in Him.

How do a person's questions about Jesus reveal what they trust for truth?

BELIEVE (JOHN 3:14-18)

¹⁴ “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his

Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ **Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.**

VERSES 14-15

Having spoken about the Son of Man descending from heaven, Jesus next spoke about Him being **lifted up**. In doing so, He was referencing a story from Numbers 21. Snakes had bitten the Israelites while they were in the desert. After Moses interceded on their behalf, God instructed him to make a likeness of a snake and lift it up on a pole. When the Israelites looked at the snake, they recovered (Num. 21:4-9).

Jesus was foretelling His death, when He would be lifted up on a cross and become the source of life for all who had been infected by the serpent's life-destroying deceit. Jesus used *lifted up* terminology later in His ministry as well (John 8:28; 12:32,34).

Jesus explained how the life He offered was different from what the Israelites experienced in the desert—the life He offered was eternal. And rather than looking at the image lifted up, the requirement for eternal life was that each individual **believes in him**. Jesus's death on the cross provided atonement for sinful humanity. Persons who look to Him with faith as the crucified and risen Lord will **have eternal life**.

Why is it so important for people to understand that salvation is available to everyone who believes in Jesus?

VERSE 16

Nicodemus must have been surprised when Jesus explained that God was making this offer to **the world**. Jews could not fathom God loving beyond His own people. Indeed, Christianity is unique in teaching that God's love is not limited by race or nationality.

For God to give **his one and only Son** referred both to the Messiah coming to earth in human form and to His atoning sacrifice on Calvary. This one statement emphasizes the Father's sacrificial self-

giving love. Salvation comes at His initiation and His expense. This gift is offered to **everyone who believes in him** (see 1:14; 1 John 2:2).

Faith provides the “how” of salvation. God does the work of regeneration, but He chooses to do so upon one’s faith. To believe is to have a personal, trustful response to God’s gift of forgiveness, grace, and eternal life. To **perish** is the opposite of having **eternal life**. Eternal life is made possible to all who believe in Jesus because, as the prologue of John’s Gospel stated, “in him was life” (John 1:4).

What makes God’s gift of salvation so appealing? What would get in the way of a person accepting this gift?

VERSES 17-18

God’s intention and desire is to **save the world**, not to condemn it. That desire was behind the virgin birth, Jesus’s sinless life, His death on the cross, and His resurrection, so that a rebellious and disobedient world might believe in God’s one and only Son. God’s dramatic actions affirm what the Old Testament taught—God’s preference is to save, not to condemn (Ezek. 18:23).

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Scripture divides the world into two groups: those who believe and those who do not (v. 18). Those who do not believe are condemned; those who believe are not condemned. The reason for the condemnation is because the non-believer has not put his or her faith in Jesus. A person who fails to believe is **already condemned** because all born to Adam’s race inherit a sinful nature.

This too would have been news to Nicodemus. First-century Jews believed that when the Messiah came, he would judge Gentiles but not Jews. Jesus stated that those who avoid God’s judgment will be those who believe in His one and only Son. The glorious news of the gospel is that grace, faith, and eternal life are still offered to all who believe.

