

John 3:1-18 You must be born again

A good study is predominated by questions, not monologues, but it's important for you to have a thorough understanding of the passage and point of the study. Please read and understand this essay for your own knowledge, and then lead the study by asking the questions which follow. Keep it lively, interactive and feel free to customize to suit your audience.

This passage contains probably the most quoted and best known statement in the Bible. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus made that statement to Nicodemus, a religious leader who had come to see Jesus. Jesus used the opportunity to explain the essence of the gospel to him, and to call him to faith. In their conversation, we see that Jesus makes His forgiveness available to everyone.

In verse 1, we are introduced to Nicodemus, a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a group of Jewish leaders who taught in the synagogues. They were often legalistic and hypocritical. Though they went to great lengths to obey the letter of the law, they often ignored the spirit of the law. In the gospels, we see that Jesus reserved His harshest words for the Pharisees. (See Luke 11:37ff)

Though we can't be certain about the motivation of Nicodemus, it's likely he visited Jesus at night because he wanted to speak to Him in secret. The Pharisees already had a building sense of animosity toward Jesus that would culminate in their plot to have Him crucified. Nicodemus, however, saw that Jesus was a righteous man and sought to speak with Him when he couldn't be spotted by the other Pharisees.

The Need To Be Born Again

Nicodemus begins with what seems to be a polite comment commending Jesus for His teachings and miracles. Jesus' response seems to come out of left field, apparently ignoring the commendation and declaring, "No one can see the kingdom of heaven unless he is born again." This puts Nicodemus back on his

heels as Jesus probably intended. Nicodemus is used to being the dispenser of approval and disapproval. You need to picture him in his flowing robe putting his arm around Jesus' shoulder saying, "Jesus, you're doing a great job. Fine job really. I'm very impressed."

Jesus, who doesn't seek or need his approval basically shrugs him off and says, "You can't even see the kingdom of Heaven, much less determine the value of its King. You need to be born again."

This flustered and confused Nicodemus who makes a pretty ridiculous comment, assuming Jesus was being literal. Jesus clarifies Nicodemus' confusion in the next couple of verses. The new birth He was referring to wasn't physical, but spiritual. Our primary problem is spiritual, and so our spirit needs a new start, or a new birth.

The key verse in this passage is verse 7. Jesus says again, "You must be born again." The you is plural and refers to all of us. It even includes people like Nicodemus, who have impressive religious resumes and others who think they are good enough to deserve heaven on their own. Being born again is what we all must do if we are to see the kingdom of God and spend eternity with Him.

The Spirit: The Means By Which We Are Born Again

In verse 8, Jesus uses another difficult analogy. He says, "The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." He is showing us that God (the Spirit) is as uncontrollable and unpredictable as the wind. He is the one who, in His time, produces new life.

The Son: The Reason We Can Be Born Again

In verse 14, Jesus makes the radical claim that faith in Him is the key to experiencing this new life. He uses another illustration – this one from the Old Testament. In Numbers 21, Moses was leading the Israelites through the wilderness. The people rebelled and complained, so God sent poisonous snakes among them, and many of the Israelites died. God showed them the consequence of sin, and He wanted to teach them about His power to forgive and heal. So rather than taking away the snakes, he instructed Moses to make a bronze one and place it on a pole where all the people could see it.

When anyone who had been bitten would look at the snake, trusting God, he would be healed. (Incidentally, this is why hospitals and ambulances use the image of a snake wrapped around a pole to symbolize healing.)

Jesus claimed He was like the bronze snake. He would be lifted up (on the cross) like the snake. When anyone would look to Him, they would be healed, and receive eternal life.

Notice that Jesus isn't identifying Himself with the snakes in the sand, who judge, but with the snake on the pole, who saves. He has the authority to judge but that's not why He came. He makes that plain when He says, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

How We Receive This New Birth

With the snake image in mind, Jesus uttered His most quoted promise: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). That "so" is not emphatic, but connective. He is saying, "This is how God loved the world: by sending the world's judge to be its savior. Just like the snake in the desert."

That verse summarizes the essence of the gospel. In that brief statement, Jesus identifies the two possible destinies all of us face – perishing and eternal life. Second, He describes God's solution to our problem – His Son. Third, He declares our need to believe in Him in order to receive eternal life. Finally, He reveals God's love, His motive for going to the cross on our behalf.

There are two main ideas that you want to communicate through this study: 1) anyone can experience new birth and have eternal life by believing in Jesus, and 2) everyone must place their faith in Christ and be born again, even people who are good or religious. Everyone needs what only Jesus can offer.

Print these question, cut them out and stick in your Bible as a discrete guide for the discussion.

LAUNCH

- If you were to die tonight and stand before God and He were to ask you, “Why should I let you into my Heaven?” what would you say?

EXPLORE

Read John 3:1-8.

1. What is a Pharisee?
2. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus at night?
3. Why did Jesus brush off Nicodemus’s compliment and respond as He did?
4. If someone were to ask you what it means to be “born again,” what would you say?
5. Given his religious credentials, how do you think Nicodemus felt when Jesus said he wasn’t able to enter the kingdom of God based on his deeds?
6. In John 3:4, Nicodemus understands Jesus’ words only at a surface level. This happens several times in the Book of John. Look up these other examples of misunderstanding and summarize your findings. John 2:19-20 John 4:1-15 John 11:11-14
7. What point is John making by recording these misunderstandings?
8. In John 3:5, Jesus says you must be born of “water and Spirit.” This is most likely a reference to Ezekiel 36:24-27, which was a well known verse to all Jews, and why Jesus is somewhat stunned that Israel’s leading teacher is baffled. Look up Ezekiel 36:24-27 and summarize what it says.
9. What does Jesus mean in verse 8 by the analogy about the wind and the Spirit?

Read John 3:8-18.

10. In verse 16 what two possible destinies does Jesus mention?
11. What did God do so we could have eternal life and not perish?
12. Jesus compares His crucifixion with Moses lifting up “the snake in the desert.” What is He talking about?
13. Why did God make a way for us to receive eternal life and not perish? What must we do to receive it?

APPLY

14. How are we all like Nicodemus?
15. What do you think makes you commendable to God?
16. Have you experienced the new birth Jesus is talking about?
17. In your own words how would you summarize the gospel message?
18. Who do you know that you need to share this message with?

Here are the answers, nice and simple. But be sure to read and understand the opening essay designed to give you background knowledge to lead well.

1. The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders who were often at odds with Jesus. They were often legalistic and felt threatened by Jesus’ influence.
2. He wanted to speak to Jesus privately without drawing the attention of his peers who would likely disapprove.
3. He wanted to challenge Nicodemus’s presumption that he was in a position to grant or withhold approval of the Son of God. It was one step in helping him see that he needs a new birth.
4. Jesus uses that phrase to describe the new life the Spirit begins in us when we receive Christ.
5. Allow the group to discuss.
6. Allow time for the group to look up the verses.
7. People often misunderstood Jesus and failed to see the spiritual message. In John’s gospel, it is those to whom the Father reveals it who are able to discern its true meaning and respond.
8. Allow the group time to look up the verse and summarize.
9. Just as the wind is uncontrollable and unpredictable, so is the Spirit of God. He works how He pleases to produce new life.
10. Perishing, and eternal life.
11. He gave His Son.
12. Read Numbers 21 and see the essay above.
13. Because He loves us. Believe in Jesus.
14. We are all prone to self- righteousness.
15. Allow the group to discuss.
16. Allow the group to discuss.
17. Allow the group to write out a brief summary of the gospel and have a few people share what they wrote.
18. Encourage the people in your group to commit to talking about Jesus with someone this week.