

# Saving Love

John 3:1-16

SS Lesson for 04/09/2017

**Devotional Scripture:** Rom 5:5-11

## OUTLINE

### INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

*Key Verse: John 3:16*

*Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

*From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary*

### MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

TEACHING ABOUT SAVING LOVE (JOHN 3:1-8)

*Saving love is about who Jesus is (1-2)*

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:13-16)

Jesus is the one true Messiah (Luke 7:18-23)

Jesus laid down His life for us (1 John 3:16)

Jesus through love provided life through Himself (1 John 4:9-10)

*Saving love is about being born again (3-4)*

Being born again can't be bought (Acts 8:17-22)

Being born again is receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-3)

Being born again is explained in God's Word (1 Peter 1:22-23)

Being born again happens because of God's mercy (Titus 3:4-6)

*Saving love is spiritual (5-6)*

Commentary about the Water and Spirit (from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)

Spirituality that is often misunderstood (1 Cor 3:1-3)

Spiritual words expressing spiritual truths (1 Cor 2:12-14)

Spiritual struggle with spiritual forces (Eph 6:12)

*Saving love is about the Holy Spirit (7-8)*

Love through the Holy Spirit because of belief in Jesus (1 John 3:22-24)

Love through the Holy Spirit because God put love in our hearts (Rom 5:5)

Love through the Holy Spirit because the Spirit is a Spirit of love (2 Tim 1:7)

Love through the Holy Spirit confirms our living in God (1 John 4:15-18)

APPLICATION OF SAVING LOVE (JOHN 3:9-16)

*The application is not in human knowledge and wisdom (9-12)*

Because God frustrates human wisdom and intelligence (1 Cor 1:18-21)

Because faith is empowered through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:3-7)

Because they are foolishness in God's sight (1 Cor 3:18-19)

Because true wisdom and understanding comes from God (Eph 1:6-9)

*The application is in Jesus' sacrifice (13-14)*

Through Jesus' sacrifice because of its power of atonement (Rom 3:21-25)

Through Jesus' sacrifice that provided the satisfaction of the penalty for the sins (1 John 2:2)

Through Jesus' sacrifice through His obedience to sacrifice His body (Heb 10:8-10)

*The application is in belief and faith in Jesus (15)*

Because through the provision and confession of faith, one is saved (Rom 10:8-10)

Because the one who believes in Jesus is not condemned (John 3:17-18)

Because of the justification that is provided through faith (Gal 2:16)

Because belief and faith in God provides righteousness (Rom 3:22)

Because belief and faith brings peace with God through Jesus (Rom 5:1)

Because Christians become children of God through belief and faith (Gal 3:26)

*The application is provided because of God's love (16)*

It is through that love that God allowed Jesus to die for us (Rom 5:8)

It is through that love that salvation appeared (Titus 3:4-5)

It is through that love that Christians are able to live through Jesus (1 John 4:9)

### CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

## Introduction

### Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson helps us to recognize that Jesus' death for us is the supreme action of **Saving Love**. The **study's aim** is to love Jesus Christ more in view of His death on our behalf. The **study's application** is to grow in appreciation of Jesus' love which secured our salvation.

*(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)*

### Key Verse: John 3:16

*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

### Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

**3:1.** Nicodemus represented the best in the nation. He was a teacher (v. 10), a Pharisee, and a **member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council**. The Sanhedrin had 70 members who were responsible for religious decisions and also, under the Romans, for civil rule. Two Sanhedrin members who appear in a favorable light in the New Testament are Joseph of Arimathea (19:38) and the Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-39; 22:3). The Sanhedrin put Jesus on trial (Luke 22:66). Nicodemus later rebuked the Pharisees for condemning Jesus without hearing Him (John 7:50-51), and he helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus (19:39-40).

**3:2.** Why did Nicodemus go **to Jesus at night**? Because of fear? Because it was the normal time for visits? Because he wanted a time of uninterrupted conversation without the distractions of the ever-present crowds? John did not say why. And yet nighttime has a sinister tone in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 19:39). Nicodemus began, **Rabbi, we know You are a Teacher who has come from God**. "We" probably means the favorable ones on the council. The titles "Rabbi" and "Teacher" are polite and flattering on one hand, but they showed Nicodemus' inadequate comprehension of who Jesus is. The words "from God" are in an emphatic position in the Greek. The **signs** had pointed out Jesus as God's Man (**God was with Him**), and Nicodemus wanted to talk to Him as one Rabbi to another.

**3:3.** But **Jesus** was not on the same level with Nicodemus. He is "from above" (*anōthen*; v. 31); therefore Nicodemus must be born "from above" (v. 3, NIV marg.; *anōthen*). To be **born again** or born "from above" (*anōthen* has both meanings; e.g., "from above" in 19:11 and "again" in Gal. 4:9) is to have a spiritual transformation which takes a person out of the kingdom of darkness into **the kingdom of God** (cf. Col. 1:13). The kingdom is the sphere or realm of God's authority and blessing which is now invisible but will be manifested on earth (Matt. 6:10).

**3:4.** **Nicodemus** was certain Jesus did not mean something absurd (such as a reincarnation or a **second** physical birth), but yet he did not grasp the nature of regeneration.

**3:5.** Various views are given to explain Jesus' words about being **born of water and the Spirit**: (1) The "water" refers to the natural birth, and the "Spirit" to the birth from above. (2) The "water" refers to the Word of God (Eph. 5:26). (3) The "water" refers to baptism as an essential part of regeneration. (This view contradicts other Bible verses that make it clear that salvation is by faith alone; e.g., John 3:16, 36; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5.) (4) The "water" is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). (5) The "water" refers to the repentance ministry of John the Baptist, and the "Spirit" refers to the application by the Holy Spirit of Christ to an individual. The fifth view has the merit of historical propriety as well as theological acceptability. John the Baptist had stirred the nation by his ministry and stress on repentance (Matt. 3:1-6). "Water" would remind Nicodemus of the Baptist's emphasis. So Jesus was saying that Nicodemus, in order to **enter the kingdom**, needed to turn to Him (repent) in order to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

**3:6-7.** There are two distinct realms: one is of fallen man (the **flesh**) and the other is of God (**the Spirit**). A fallen person cannot regenerate himself; he needs a divine operation. Only God's Holy Spirit can regenerate a human spirit. People should not stumble at or reject the importance of Jesus' words. They **must be born** from above. The necessity is absolute and is universally binding.

**3:8.** This verse contains a wordplay which cannot be adequately expressed in English. The Greek word *pneuma* means both wind and Spirit. The work of **the Spirit** (*pneuma*) is invisible and mysterious like the blowing of **the wind** (*pneuma*). Man controls neither.

**3:9-10. Nicodemus asked...** how this spiritual transformation takes place. **Jesus** answered that Nicodemus, as the **teacher** of Israel (the Gr. has the article "the"), ought to know. The Old Testament prophets spoke of the new Age with its working of the Spirit (Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29). The nation's outstanding teacher ought to **understand** how God by His sovereign grace can give someone a new heart (1 Sam. 10:6; Jer. 31:33).

**3:11.** But Nicodemus was ignorant of the realm of which Jesus spoke. He represented the nation's unbelief and lack of knowledge. Jesus, like the prophets, spoke to the nation about divine themes but the Jews rejected His witness. "Witness" (or **testimony**; *martyrian*) is a common word in John's Gospel (see the chart at 5:33-34).

**3:12.** Since Nicodemus could not grasp the basic teaching of regeneration which Jesus presented in **earthly** analogies, how could he understand and **believe** the more abstract **heavenly** matters such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Jesus' coming glorification?

**3:13. No one has ever gone into heaven** and then come back to earth, able to give clear teaching about divine matters. The one exception is Jesus who is **the Son of Man** (cf. 1:50-51; Dan. 7:13; Matt. 26:64). He is the "Ladder" between heaven and earth with access to both realms (cf. John 1:50-51). He "descended" in the Incarnation and "ascended" in the Ascension. He also was in **heaven** before the Incarnation, and therefore knows the divine mysteries.

**3:14-15.** The thought of elevation to heaven (v. 13) leads to the thought of Jesus being **lifted up** (cf. 8:28; 12:32). **Moses** raised a bronze **snake** on a pole as a cure for a punishment due to disobedience (cf. Num. 21:4-9). **So** Jesus would **be lifted up** on a cross for people's sin, so **that** a look of faith gives **eternal life** to those doomed to die.

**3:16.** Whether this verse was spoken by John or Jesus, it is God's Word and is an important summary of the gospel. God's motivation toward people is love. God's love is not limited to a few or to one group of people but His gift is for **the whole world**. God's love was expressed in the giving of His most priceless gift—**His unique Son** (cf. Rom. 8:3, 32). The Greek word translated **one and only**, referring to the Son, is *monogenē*, which means "only begotten," or "only born-one." It is also used in John 1:14, 18; 3:18; and 1 John 4:9. On man's side, the gift is simply to be received, not earned (John 1:12-13). A person is saved by believing, by trusting in Christ. **Perish** (*apolētai*) means not annihilation but rather a final destiny of "ruin" in hell apart from God who is life, truth, and joy. **Eternal life** is a new quality of life, which a believer has now as a present possession and will possess forever (cf. 10:28; 17:3).

**3:17.** Though light casts shadows, its purpose is to illuminate. Though those who do not believe are condemned, God's purpose in sending **His Son** is salvation (**to save**), not damnation (**to condemn**). **God** does **not** delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23, 32). He desires that everyone be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

**3:18.** The instrumental means of salvation is believing in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. But people who reject the light of the *Logos* are in the dark (1:5; 8:12) and are therefore **already** under God's judgment. They stand **condemned**. They are like those sinful, dying Israelites who willfully rejected the divine remedy (Num. 21:4-9). A believer in Christ, on the other hand, is under "no condemnation" (Rom. 8:1); he "will not be condemned" (John 5:24).

**3:19. Men** love **darkness** not for its own sake but because of what it hides. They want to continue undisturbed in their **evil** (*ponēra*, "wicked"; cf. v. 20 which has a different word for evil) **deeds**. A believer is also a sinner (though a redeemed one), but he confesses his sin and responds to God (cf. 1 John 1:6-7). In the ultimate sense, man's love of darkness rather than God the **Light** (John 1:5, 10-11; 1 John 1:5) is his love for idols. He worships and serves "created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25).

**3:20.** Just as natural light shows up what is otherwise unseen, so Christ **the Light** exposes people's deeds as "evil." (The word "evil" here is *phaula* ["worthless"], also used by John in 5:29.) Unbelievers

have no ultimate meaning of life, no worthy motivation, no adequate goal, and a destiny of doom. Yet *everyone who does evil hates the light* (as well as loves darkness, 3:19). He fears that if he comes to the light **his deeds will be** seen as worthless, and he would need to turn from them.

**3:21.** Jesus is like a magnet. His people are drawn to Him and welcome His revelation. Though **the light** rebukes their sin, they respond in repentance and faith. They live **by the truth** (cf. 2 John 1-2, 4; 3 John 1, 4). By regeneration they live differently than their former lives of darkness. Their new lives are by faith in Jesus and His Word. And the Spirit, working in their lives, gives them new power, goals, and interests (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10).

## **Lesson Introduction and Background**

### **From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

One popular story type is the mystery. A foul deed is committed, clues are gathered, suspects are interviewed, and finally the perpetrator is revealed. Some readers prefer love stories. Two people meet, discover an unlikely attraction, and eventually overcome differences to form a lasting bond of love. Today's lesson reflects on the good news of Jesus in a way that combines the mystery with the love story. The mystery is about how God acted to make his world right—a mystery revealed. The love story is about why God acted in such a self-sacrificial way on behalf of rebellious humans.

Our text comes from one of the most beloved books in the Bible, the Gospel of John. In providing narratives of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it is rather different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those three (known as the synoptic Gospels) are notable for their similarities. John's Gospel, written later, assumes the reader knows the main points of the storyline found in the other Gospels as it provides different, additional material. John likes to narrate Jesus' private, one-on-one conversations, including those he had with religious teachers. Today's text also belongs in this category: Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people. The Pharisees were a leading party of Jewish thought and practice in the New Testament period. They advocated careful adherence to the Law of Moses and to the traditions they had developed about the law. Their aim was to build a fence around the law. That is, they taught that if people followed their traditions (and thereby stayed outside the fence), then they wouldn't even come close to breaking God's law. Though the Pharisees promoted a difficult form of Jewish observance, they were quite popular in Jesus' time and beyond. Their strictness was a channel for the zeal many felt for the God of Israel.

## **Major Theme Analysis**

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **Teaching About Saving Love (John 3:1-8)**

- 1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.
- 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."
- 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"
- 5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'
- 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

## **Saving love is about who Jesus is (1-2)**

*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:13-16)*

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

*Jesus is the one true Messiah (Luke 7:18-23)*

18 John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, 19 he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" 20 When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" 21 At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. 22 So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. 23 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

*Jesus laid down His life for us (1 John 3:16)*

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

*Jesus through love provided life through Himself (1 John 4:9-10)*

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

## **Saving love is about being born again (3-4)**

*Being born again can't be bought (Acts 8:17-22)*

17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. 18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money 19 and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.

*Being born again is receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-3)*

19:1 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples 2 and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied.

*Being born again is explained in God's Word (1 Peter 1:22-23)*

22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. 23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

*Being born again happens because of God's mercy (Titus 3:4-6)*

4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior

## **Saving love is spiritual (5-6)**

*Commentary about the Water and Spirit (from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)*

Very few Christians doubt that the Holy Spirit plays a vital part in being born again (see Romans 2:29; 2 Corinthians 3:6). After we are born again, we “are led by the Spirit of God” (Romans 8:14) and we walk in his ways (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16, 25). On the other hand, there is a great deal of disagreement over the meaning of *water* in this context, and there are numerous ideas. One idea is that the reference is to the amniotic fluid that surrounds a baby in the womb before physical birth occurs. Another idea is that Jesus is talking about John’s baptism as practiced, for example, in Matthew 3:6. Still another idea is that Jesus is thinking about Christian baptism such as we see Peter proclaim in Acts 2:38. A fourth idea is that Jesus is drawing upon Old Testament images of water and Spirit. These four theories do not exhaust the list of proposals! Since Jesus seems to want “born again” in verse 3 to mean the same thing as *born of water and of the Spirit*, then the reference cannot be to amniotic fluid. What Jesus has in mind is one spiritual rebirth, not a physical birth plus a spiritual rebirth. The idea that *water* refers to John’s baptism is not strong, because that baptism is designed to be temporary (Acts 19:1–5). The idea that *water* may refer to Christian baptism has a great appeal when we consider the importance that this concept receives in the New Testament (e.g., Colossians 2:12). However, the problem with this idea is that Christian baptism does not come into being until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). If Jesus is referring to Christian baptism here, then it means that he is scolding Nicodemus in verse 10 (below) for failing to understand something that has not yet even come into practice. A good case can be made for a reference to the Old Testament ideas of water and Spirit. See especially Ezekiel 36:25–27. There, *water* stands for cleansing from impurity while *Spirit* points to transformed hearts. Nicodemus, the Old Testament scholar, should understand these things. In passing we may note that as the Old Testament Passover celebration foreshadows the Lord’s Supper of the New Testament era, so also do certain Old Testament images of water point toward the New Testament practice of baptism (1 Peter 3:18–22).

*Spirituality that is often misunderstood (1 Cor 3:1-3)*

3:1 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

*Spiritual words expressing spiritual truths (1 Cor 2:12-14)*

13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

*Spiritual struggle with spiritual forces (Eph 6:12)*

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

## **Saving love is about the Holy Spirit (7-8)**

*Love through the Holy Spirit because of belief in Jesus (1 John 3:22-24)*

22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

*Love through the Holy Spirit because God put love in our hearts (Rom 5:5)*

5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

*Love through the Holy Spirit because the Spirit is a Spirit of love (2 Tim 1:7)*

7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

*Love through the Holy Spirit confirms our living in God (1 John 4:15-18)*

16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

### **Application of Saving Love (John 3:9-16)**

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.

12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

### **The application is not in human knowledge and wisdom (9-12)**

*Because God frustrates human wisdom and intelligence (1 Cor 1:18-21)*

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

*Because faith is empowered through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:3-7)*

4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. 6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

*Because they are foolishness in God's sight (1 Cor 3:18-19)*

18 Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.

*Because true wisdom and understanding comes from God (Eph 1:6-9)*

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ

### **The application is in Jesus' sacrifice (13-14)**

*Through Jesus' sacrifice because of its power of atonement (Rom 3:21-25)*

22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

*Through Jesus' sacrifice that provided the satisfaction of the penalty for the sins (1 John 2:2)*

2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

*Through Jesus' sacrifice through His obedience to sacrifice His body (Heb 10:8-10)*

8 First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). 9 Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. 10 And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

### **The application is in belief and faith in Jesus (15)**

*Because through the provision and confession of faith, one is saved (Rom 10:8-10)*

9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

*Because the one who believes in Jesus is not condemned (John 3:17-18)*

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

*Because of the justification that is provided through faith (Gal 2:16)*

16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

*Because belief and faith in God provides righteousness (Rom 3:22)*

22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,

*Because belief and faith brings peace with God through Jesus (Rom 5:1)*

5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

*Because Christians become children of God through belief and faith (Gal 3:26)*

26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,

### **The application is provided because of God's love (16)**

*It is through that love that God allowed Jesus to die for us (Rom 5:8)*

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

*It is through that love that salvation appeared (Titus 3:4-5)*

4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

*It is through that love that Christians are able to live through Jesus (1 John 4:9)*

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.



# Conclusion and Other Thoughts

## *Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh*

### **The Theology of Nicodemus Turned Upside-Down (3:2-15)**

As we begin to focus upon the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus, it is important to understand why John chose to record this incident. I personally suspect that John was present at this conversation. John does not record this encounter with Jesus to show us the conversion of Nicodemus, for no affirmation of faith is recorded here. Nicodemus came to Jesus, perhaps out of his own personal interest in Jesus, but in spite of this he beautifully represents the classical stance of orthodox and conservative Judaism at the time of Jesus.<sup>70</sup> This seems evident in the words of our Lord in verse 11: “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you (plural) do not receive our witness.”

In this discussion, the theology of Jesus is contrasted against the backdrop of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy, represented by Nicodemus. Here is how Nicodemus and all of Judaism must change their thinking before they can see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus’ evaluation of the person of Jesus is stated in verse 2: “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

From this, I would conclude that to Nicodemus Jesus was at least accepted as a prophet, a bonafide spokesman for God. The signs our Lord had performed in Jerusalem had convinced him of that. But the theology of Nicodemus and his contemporaries did not go nearly far enough. Because of this Jesus overturned Jewish theology at several crucial points. This is spelled out in the following verses.

**(1) The Kingdom is experienced, not by reform, but by rebirth, verses 3-4.** Essentially, Judaism believed that would come when all Israel obeyed the Law for one single day. The problem for Nicodemus, and others like him, was to reform the nation. The kingdom was almost exclusively an earthly one to the Jews, and it would begin when they could ‘clean up their act’ sufficiently for Messiah to come. Jesus had something far different to say on this subject: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

The figure of speech ‘born again’ was not foreign to Nicodemus. It was a figure applied to a bridegroom on the occasion of his marriage, to the Chief of the Academy on his promotion, to the king on his enthronement, and to the proselyte on his entrance into Judaism. The application of this expression to the entrance of a Jew into the kingdom of God left Nicodemus’ head reeling. A literal interpretation of these words seem most likely, but made no sense at all. This statement by our Lord caught him completely off guard, and the complete lack of understanding on the part of Nicodemus is apparent. “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” (John 3:4).

**(2) The essence of rebirth is not physical, but spiritual, verses 5-8.** There is a material aspect of the kingdom. Our Lord will come bodily to the earth and establish the Millennial Kingdom for the nation Israel, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. But this was all that the Jews could think about—just the physical and material side of the kingdom. Nicodemus revealed that he was thinking materialistically and not spiritually. Our Lord restated the biblical requirements for entrance into the kingdom in different terms: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

This expression, ‘born of water and the Spirit’ has not clarified the issue, but clouded it, at least for many theologians. Some have found in it evidence for the unbiblical doctrine of baptismal regeneration (i.e., that baptism is the means of salvation, rather than the manifestation of it). Others interpret it to mean that men must be born both physically (of water) and spiritually (of the Spirit). This position has much to commend it, for water was employed in those days symbolically for human sperm. Also, the next verse (verse 6) contrasts that which is merely physical from that which is spiritual in nature.

If Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture, the best commentary on these words of our Lord is to be found in Ezekiel 36:24-27, where the prophet speaks of the future restoration of the nation Israel:

“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own Land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

Here the rebirth of the nation Israel (cf. also Ezekiel 37) is described in terms of washing (with water) and the inducement of the Spirit. As a teacher of Israel, more than this as 'the' teacher of Israel (vs. 10), Nicodemus should have associated the statement of Jesus with the words of Ezekiel concerning the establishment of the kingdom. Ezekiel used both water and the Spirit with reference to the process of spiritual birth, by which men entered into the kingdom of God. Israel must not enter into the kingdom by means of reform, but by rebirth. And more than this, it is by means of a spiritual rebirth, whereby God cleanses His people and places within them His Spirit.

The work of the Spirit is distinct from that of the flesh. They are real in two different dimensions. Rebirth is a spiritual process. The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be observed or controlled, but its effects, like that of the wind, are obvious (verses 6-8).

**Further Clarification, verses 9-12.** Nicodemus could not seem to grasp what he was being told, for he questioned, "How can these things be?" (verse 9). Our Lord gently rebuked the ignorance of Nicodemus, for as yet He has not gotten to the more difficult aspects of His teaching. As 'the teacher' of Israel Nicodemus should have immediately recognized what our Lord was talking about, for entrance into the kingdom of God by rebirth was revealed by the Old Testament prophets. Our Lord had not yet ventured from the theological stomping ground of those who taught from the Old Testament Scriptures.

Nevertheless, it was at these very crucial points that Jesus differed from contemporary Judaism, including Nicodemus (verse 12). When our Lord used the expression 'we' ('we speak,' 'we know,' 'we have seen,') it may be that He was alluding to the presence of some of His disciples. I am more inclined to think that our Lord was referring to Himself and John the Baptist, His predecessor. If Nicodemus cannot understand those things of which the Old Testament writers spoke (the 'earthly things,' verse 12), how would he be able to grasp the even deeper spiritual truths which our Lord was about to reveal (in verses 13-21)?

**(3) Jesus: Not a Man sent from God, but God come as Man, verse 13.** The one thing about Jesus that impressed the crowds (Matt. 7:28-29) and irritated the Jewish leaders (Matt. 9:1:23) was that He taught and acted with authority. The basic issue for a Pharisee like Nicodemus was the authority of Jesus. Nicodemus was willing to grant, by virtue of the signs performed by our Lord, that Jesus was a man sent from God, but this was not nearly enough. Jesus was God sent as a man. Our Lord's heavenly origin set him apart from every other Israelite, even the great men such as Abraham, Moses and the prophets: "And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of man!" (John 3:13).

This is why Jesus was qualified to speak to Nicodemus of 'heavenly things' (verse 12)—He is the only one come down from heaven. He is the Son of Man. In my opinion, our Lord employed the term 'Son of Man' with reference to Himself with the specific intent of identifying Himself with the Messiah, referred to in Daniel 7:13 as the 'Son of Man.' Neither Nicodemus nor anyone else can give sufficient heed to the words of our Lord Jesus, until they have come to grips with His person. He is God come as man. Once that is settled, men must heed His teaching.

**(4) Jesus: Exalted, not by a crown, but by a cross, verses 14-15.** Every devout Israelite eagerly awaited the coming of Messiah. They looked for Him to be lifted up, to be exalted as the King of Israel. But what they failed to comprehend was that the kingdom was not initiated by a crown, but by a cross. The triumphal entry was Israel's idea of the introduction of the kingdom. What the nation failed to understand was that God's sequence is suffering, then glory; the cross, then the crown (cf. Philippians 2:5-11).

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal Life" (John 3:14-15).

From his background Nicodemus could understand that to be 'born again' meant an entrance into a new state, a new condition. He should have understood by now that this rebirth was not a material or fleshly matter, but that produced by the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit. But the basis of that rebirth is only now revealed by our Lord. The basis for entrance into eternal life is the work of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is by virtue of the fact that God's Messiah has been lifted up on the cross of Calvary that men can be born again.

To facilitate the Jewish mindset of Nicodemus, our Lord likened His death upon the cross to the lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness as recorded in the book of Numbers chapter 21. When the Israelites rebelled against Moses and God, God sent fiery serpents to smite the rebels. When Moses interceded for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and to lift it up on a pole. Those who were bitten had only to look upon this bronze serpent to be healed.

The death of Jesus upon the cross was much like this. Men are guilty, sinners—rebels against God, and under the sentence of death. Jesus Christ took upon Himself the sins of men and suffered the wrath of God in their

place. He was lifted up on a cross, bearing their punishment, and God's holy wrath. Those who look up to Him, who trust in Him for forgiveness of sins are born again and enter into the kingdom of God.

How is one to see the kingdom of God? He must be born again, that is, he must enter into a new kind of life by the work of the Holy Spirit, based upon the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross of Calvary. To be born again is to admit that you are suffering from the terminal illness of sin and to find healing from it in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross for sinners. It is to believe that He died in your place and provides you with His righteousness, thus accomplishing entrance for you into His Kingdom.

### **The Heart of God and the Hearts of Men (3:16-21)**

The previous verses seem to have said it all. What more is there to say? Bible students are not all agreed as to who is talking in verses 16-21. Some say it is our Lord; others, that John is now editorializing. It really makes little difference, for either way it is still the Word of God. Whether or not it is printed in red ink is only a matter of academic interest.

What is important to me about these verses is that we are taken beyond the meaning of salvation, taken beyond the means of our salvation, to the motive behind it. It is not sufficient for the writer of this Gospel under inspiration to simply tell us how God has made salvation available to men, but He is constrained to also tell us why. Here we are exposed to the heart of God, as well as to the hearts of men.

I suspect that most of you realize that I am what would be called a 'Calvinist,' not because I am a follower of Calvin, nor because I am overly excited about some others who claim the same distinction, but because I believe this best fits the teaching of Scripture. I hope you will understand what I say when I suggest that in many ways the Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, were very inclined toward Calvinistic viewpoints. They believed in the sovereignty of God, for example. They were firm believers in election. The difference is that they believed God had elected Jews to salvation and condemned the rest. The Pharisees were separatists who strove to keep Judaism distinct from pagan influence. They despised paganism. They even disdained the common people of Israel who were not nearly so meticulous on matters of ceremonial cleansings and so on (John 7:48-49). The love of God did not seem to dominate their thinking, or their actions. It is for this reason, I believe, that our Lord did not stop with the plan of salvation, but went on to probe the reason for it.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Here the heart of God is revealed. It is not the love of the Son which is here emphasized but rather the love of the Father Who gave the Son. The cross of Calvary is the measure of God's love for man. Now any Pharisee would gladly agree with this. The bitter pill for them to swallow was the revelation that God's gift of eternal life through the death of His Son was for 'the world.' The doctrine of election confirmed for the Pharisee salvation for every Jew, and consigned the nations to perdition. But the love of God constrained Him to make provision for the salvation of men from every nation. This was news for the Jews.

If the positive motivation for the cross of Calvary was the love of God, negatively it must also be said that the primary motivation for sending the Son was not in order to condemn men: "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him!" (John 3:17). Salvation, not damnation, was the purpose of God's love for mankind. Condemnation was incidental, but not primary in God's gift of His Son at Calvary. Verses 18 and 19 help to clarify this point:

"He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil" (John 3:18-19).

Strictly speaking, the coming of Christ to the world and His death on the cross did not condemn men to eternal damnation. Men were already condemned. The Son came to accomplish salvation for condemned men. He came into a world of sinners, who were under the sentence of death. Those who look to Him for salvation are delivered from condemnation. Those who do not remain in the state of condemnation in which they were found. Our Lord's death is the solution, not the problem. Our Lord came as light to reveal man's need of a Savior. Men revealed their sinfulness by rejecting that light and nailing Him to the cross. It was because men were condemned sinners that Christ came to provide salvation. It was because men were worthy of condemnation that they rejected His provision.

While verses 16 and 17 reveal the motive of God in sending the Son, verses 20 and 21 expose the wickedness of the hearts of those who reject Him.

“For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:20-21).

Man is a sinner. He does not sin reluctantly, but with pleasure. When his wickedness is exposed, he has no intention of forsaking sin, and so he extinguishes the light which reveals it. Man in both deed and motive is a sinner. It is for this reason that he is worthy of condemnation. It is for this reason God sent His Son to save.

*(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/manifestation-messiah-nicodemus-john-31-21>)*

### ***Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary***

For Nicodemus, the story of God’s love was a mystery for two reasons: it challenged his view of his own importance, and it was still unfolding before his eyes. For us the story may be a mystery as well. Though we might not think ourselves important, we still hold stubbornly to our independence. Though we know the story’s climax, it may be so familiar to us that we find it commonplace. Perhaps we need to reclaim the mysterious wonder of the Bible’s storyline as it is summarized in today’s text. The God who created us has acted time and again to undo the guilt and power of sin. Jesus predicted that such efforts would reach their climax in himself as the one who went on to be lifted up on the cross. The one and only Son of God surrendered to death so that undeserving humans would not have to. You and I are those undeserving humans, the ones whom God so loved that he gave Jesus over to death (Romans 3:23-26). By his resurrection he claimed authority that belongs to God alone. By his authority alone can people enter God’s promised kingdom, the full realization of his gracious love.

### ***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary***

1. Never let fear or lack of understanding keep you away from God or His Word (John 3:1-2)
2. Faith in Jesus Christ does not just fix our lives; it gives us new lives (vss. 3-7)
3. The Holy Spirit is invisible and beyond our control, but we are changed by His power (vss. 8-9)
4. Seek to know God, and trust Him, not your own intellect, to reveal the truth of His Word (vss. 10-13)
5. Point others to the love of God as you share the gospel and your testimony, inviting them to know Christ (vss. 14-15)
6. God’s love holds nothing back and is free to everyone (vs. 16)