

John Lesson 1

John's Gospel: Come and See

We get to know people by spending time with them. We observe their actions, listen to their words, and notice how they treat others. Over time, we learn who they really are. John spent about three years with Jesus, and by writing this detailed account of Jesus's life, John gave us the opportunity to decide for ourselves who Jesus was, and is, and what difference He makes to our lives. John had made up his mind. He believed that Jesus was the Creator, the Son of God, and God in flesh sent to redeem the world (see 1:3, 14; 3:16). Knowing Jesus had transformed John's life. And John's Gospel calls us to the same transformation. It allows us to see what John saw, feel what he felt, and believe what he believed.

Who Was John?

John knew Jesus, and more important, Jesus knew John. John referred to himself as *the disciple Jesus loved*. John is one of the most prominent figures in the New Testament. The four Gospels and Acts mention him repeatedly. In addition to this book we are studying, the New Testament contains three letters attributed to John—1, 2, and 3 John. And the Bible's final book, Revelation, also names John as its author.

Before meeting Jesus, John was a fisherman. He and his older brother James fished in the Sea of Galilee alongside their father, Zebedee. John was one of a few fishermen Jesus called to be "fishers of men" (Mk. 1:17). Church history tells us that John was the youngest of Jesus's 12 disciples and that he lived the longest, possibly into his 90s. If so, that gave John many years to ponder what he had learned from Jesus.

Like all of us, John needed the life changes that come through knowing Jesus. As a young man, John showed typical attitudes of immaturity. At one point, John and James asked Jesus to do whatever they asked of Him. It appears that these brothers were used to getting what they wanted. In this case, they wanted the seats of highest privilege on Jesus's left and right after He ascended to glory (see Mk. 10:35-37).

Jesus hinted at these brothers' personalities when He nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder" (see Mk. 3:17). These Sons of Thunder needed to learn about humility and about loving others more than themselves. When the Samaritans resisted Jesus (see Lk. 9:51-56), John and James asked Him if He wanted them to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans. Their impulsive solution to the tension was to annihilate the people in the Samaritan village.

But over time, John did learn from Jesus and his attitudes did change. In 1 John, he wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (4:7). Clearly, Jesus's life and teaching had transformed John. He was not a perfect follower, but he knew that no matter how often his motives had been self-centered, Jesus would never give up on him. Jesus had persistently communicated grace, love, and truth to John and the other disciples—messages that John and others later delivered to the world.

After Christ's death and resurrection, John's testimony grew strong. When the Jewish religious leaders gave Peter and John direct orders to stop speaking about Jesus, they replied, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). John's boldness was one of the hallmarks of his life and ministry.



Think about the power of being with Jesus. No one who encounters Jesus stays the same. Either you will grow closer to Him or you will move further from Him. As John spent time with Jesus, he was drawn to Him. John's attitude changed, and his life changed. As you study Jesus's life, notice how your heart changes. Seek to know Him better. Draw near to Him and

let Him transform your life too.

Historical Background

John probably wrote his Gospel between AD 70 and 100. Several decades had passed since Christ's death and resurrection. However, the cultural and political situation of the regions where Jesus had ministered was just as complex as when He was on the earth. Three major factors influenced people in this region in the late first century.

John Lesson 7—John 3:1-15

You Must Be Born Again



Memorize the TRUTH!

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3

DAY 1: John 3:1-2—Nicodemus at Night

1. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the council that ruled over the Jews. Read Matt. 23:1-7. What were the Pharisees known for, and what did Jesus seem to think of them?
2. From what Nicodemus said,
 - a. what had he observed about Jesus?
 - b. what signs was he probably talking about?
 - c. what question did he seem to be asking?
3. Nicodemus visited Jesus at night, possibly because he did not want anyone to see him. Do you ever feel like Nicodemus, that you need to be secretive about your spiritual questions? Explain your answer.

DAY 2: John 3:3-5—Born Again

4. On the basis of Jesus’s answers to Nicodemus in verses 3 and 5, what do you think Nicodemus’s real question was?
5. Nicodemus, a teacher of the Scriptures we know as the Old Testament, would have been familiar with God’s kingdom. Read 1 Chr. 17:9-14; Ps. 103:19; and Isa. 9:6-7. What are some characteristics of this kingdom?
6. From verses 3 and 5 of Jn. 3, how did Jesus say a person could “enter the kingdom of God”?
7. Did Nicodemus understand what Jesus meant? Read Ezek. 36:25-27 and 1 Pet. 1:22-23. How do these Scriptures add to your understanding of what Jesus meant?



Learn the TRUTH!

Nicodemus had spent his entire life learning about God and the Scriptures. But he knew that he did not have all the answers. Do you have spiritual questions? Are you eager to know

God’s truth? Ask God to give you a humble heart and an open mind. Then ask Him to teach you one new thing about Jesus this week. Be ready to share what you learn in your small group.

DAY 3: John 3:6-8—Born of the Spirit

8. Read Rom. 8:5-8; 1 Cor. 2:14; and Gal. 5:16-17.
 - a. How do these verses help you understand the difference between flesh and spirit?
 - b. Why is this difference important to know for anyone who seeks to enter God's kingdom?
9. What are some characteristics of wind? How is the Holy Spirit like wind?

DAY 4: John 3:9-12—We Speak of What We Know

10. Read 1 Cor. 2:6-12. Why is biblical knowledge alone insufficient for true spiritual understanding? What else is needed?
11. In your own words, what point was Jesus making in Jn. 3:11-12?

DAY 5 John 3:13-15—The Son of Man Lifted Up

12. What did Jesus suggest about Himself by the words He used in 3:13?
13. What did Jesus hint would happen to Him by the words He used in 3:14-15? (See also 8:28; 12:32-33.)
14. Jesus referred to an event recorded in Num. 21:4-9. Read that passage and write what is represented by
 - a. the Israelites.
 - b. the serpent's poison. (See also Rom. 3:23.)
 - c. the consequences of being bitten. (See also Rom. 6:23.)
 - d. the uplifted bronze serpent.
 - e. looking at the serpent.
 - f. the result of looking at the serpent. (See also Jn. 3:16.)
15. How did Jesus say eternal life is possible?

***Apply the TRUTH!***

The people of Moses's day were sick from the bites of poisonous snakes. But everyone is sick from the poison of sin. The good news is, Jesus came to relieve us of our sin-sickness.

You will learn more about this as you study further in John. For now, think about the ways your life has been poisoned by sin. If you feel comfortable, share these in your small group and pray for one another.

DAY 6: Participate in Class

Lesson 7 Commentary

You Must Be Born Again

John 3:1-15

Jesus loved people. He related with men and women from all walks of life. His conversations helped people to see who He was and what He had come to do. Chapter 3 recounts the first of seven dialogues Jesus had during His ministry. This lesson begins with Jesus's conversation with a religious man, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus Seeks Out Jesus (John 3:1-10)

Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He may not have wanted other religious leaders to see him. Jesus was controversial, after all. Nicodemus belonged to the religious party called the Pharisees. The Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, consisted of two parties. The Pharisees identified with ordinary lay people and ruled over the local synagogues. The Sadducees were the aristocratic party. They influenced temple worship and dealt with the Roman government. Pharisees believed in the physical resurrection of the dead. But the Sadducees did not. Despite their differences, the two groups worked together to rule the Jewish people. So Nicodemus initiated a private conversation with Jesus.



Think about the risks involved with faith. It seems that Nicodemus did not want anyone to see him talking to Jesus. There may have been hard consequences for him if he had been discovered meeting with the Lord. That is probably why he decided to visit Jesus by night.

Similarly, there can be difficult consequences for us today when we take the risk of seeking out Jesus and finding answers to our spiritual questions. But those risks are worth it. Knowing Jesus and the life He gives—both now and forever—is worth any price we may need to pay.

Nicodemus began by acknowledging that Jesus was a teacher from God. He observed that no one could perform such miracles without God's power. Jesus did not comment about what Nicodemus said. Instead, Jesus told him truth he needed to hear. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

We can understand why Jesus's words confused Nicodemus. Everyone knows an old man cannot go back into his mother's womb and be born a second time. So Jesus replied, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

The Jewish people would have been familiar with the idea of the kingdom of God. David had declared, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19). But the Jews also would have understood the kingdom of God as an earthly kingdom that had not yet come. They might have recalled God's promise to establish David's throne forever (see 1 Chr. 17:9-14).

To Jews, this kingdom of God was their right and privilege as God's chosen people. But Jesus challenged their thinking. He was saying that entering God's kingdom does not depend on bloodline or physical birth. Rather, it is possible only by being born again. The Greek word translated "again" had meaning at two levels. It could mean "again"—doing something a second time, which is what Nicodemus assumed. But it can also mean "from above."

Jesus was speaking of spiritual birth. He explained that to enter the kingdom of God one must be born of water and of the Spirit. Some believe that Jesus meant the water associated with physical birth—amniotic fluid. Others think He meant the repentance connected with John the Baptist's water baptism. Ezek. 36:25-26 provides more insight into what Jesus may have meant. This passage describes the inner cleansing we need to have relationship with God. And Jesus is the only one who has made this cleansing possible. He makes those who believe in Him clean and gives them a new spirit.

Pharisees taught that relationship with God depended on being religious and doing good deeds. But the kind of birth Jesus spoke about comes from above. God's Spirit produces transformation from the inside out. This was a complete shift away from the way Nicodemus thought and from the way he had lived his whole life.

To explain further, Jesus used the image of the wind. The illustration contains a play on words that is not evident in some languages. The Greek *pneuma* can mean either “spirit” or “wind,” so Jesus connected the two. “The wind blows where it wishes,” He said, “and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” We see the effect of the wind but not its source. In the same way, Nicodemus had seen the effect of God’s Spirit at work through Jesus’s signs. Jesus was challenging Nicodemus to look beyond the signs to see the source of His power. Everything Nicodemus believed about his privilege as a Jew was being challenged. “How can these things be?” he asked.

Jesus answered with questions of His own. He asked how Nicodemus could be a teacher of Israel but not understand what Jesus had been saying. Nicodemus had diligently studied the Scriptures, including the messianic prophecies. He had seen Jesus’s signs. Yet he did not know who Jesus was or what He had come to do. So Jesus took the conversation even deeper.



Think about how Jesus responds to questions. In the book of John we see many people who went to Jesus to ask questions. Usually, instead of giving direct answers, Jesus offered something much more—He gave them Himself. Today, it is the same—Jesus does not always answer our hows and whys. But He does invite us to spend all eternity getting to know Him.

Jesus Makes Six Bold Declarations (John 3:11-15)

Nicodemus had dedicated his life to studying the old covenant. But Jesus was bringing in a new covenant. In this new covenant, relationship with God came by believing in “the Son of Man”—Jesus. What Jesus said next must have challenged Nicodemus even more:

“We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen.” Jesus knew God the Father in a way no one else had ever experienced. Jesus bears the unique revelation of who God is.

“You do not receive our testimony.” Jesus had come to give the gifts of grace and truth. But the Jews envisioned a rescuer who would work through the Jewish religious system.

“How can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” Jesus had used the wind as a word picture to explain how the Spirit of God works. But Nicodemus had not understood. How then could he understand other spiritual concepts?

“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” To Nicodemus, God was holy and transcendent. He could not comprehend that this holy God would actually descend into this sinful world. But that is what He had done. God was standing right there, talking to him!

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” The reference to the serpent is from Num. 21, where a glance at the bronze serpent atop a pole brought healing to the Israelites. Jesus would be “lifted up” on a cross. Nicodemus needed to look at Jesus, see Him for who He is, and accept His revelation. Doing so would bring spiritual healing.

“That whoever believes in him will have eternal life.” Jesus’s words up to this point all led to this critical concept of eternal life. Jesus’s crucifixion would be the gateway to life everlasting.

Receiving this eternal life initiates the believer into “the kingdom of God.” Jesus was inviting Nicodemus into a new way of thinking and believing. Later, we will see that he accepted Jesus’s invitation.



Personalize the TRUTH!

Have you been born again? Has God’s Spirit made you new and begun a spiritual transformation in your life? Have you entered into the new relationship God wants for you? If you’re not sure, or if you know this is something you want but have not yet experienced, talk to your small group leader or class leader.