

John 3 v 1-21 – Leader’s version

For an hour study, just do the starred * questions

Check in – ask everyone, including the leaders, how they are and how they're feeling about studying the Bible today.

What does the passage say and mean?

Read John 3 v 1-8

1. What are we told about Nicodemus?

Nicodemus was a 'member of the Jewish ruling council', meaning the Sanhedrin. He was therefore a man of significant influence in Jewish society. The Pharisees were a religious group who were very concerned about keeping God's law, to the point of adding in extra laws to make sure people didn't get anywhere near the possibility of breaking the ones God had originally given.

The Pharisees and the Sanhedrin are often shown to be against Jesus, trying to trip Him up or plotting to kill Him. Nicodemus is not following his peers; he's searching for the truth.

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To what extent do you think your search for the truth about Jesus is influenced by your peers?

SHOUT-OUT In what way do they influence you?

Write their answers to the second question on the flip-chart. Examples might include fear of mockery, encouragement, disapproval, they have no influence because this is personal, etc.

2. Why do you think Nicodemus met with Jesus at night?

It may have been because Nicodemus didn't want his colleagues to know he'd been talking to Jesus 'off the record'. Maybe he waited till the crowds had dispersed and Jesus was free for a private chat. Etc.

Whatever the practical reason at the time, the symbolism of meeting at night is significant – Nicodemus' inner darkness is Jesus' main concern.

3. According to Nicodemus, what do the Pharisees know about Jesus? (v2)

They recognise Him as a Rabbi (teacher) who has 'come from God'. They recognise Jesus' miracles as signs from God, believing that God is 'with Him' rather than that He is God. They are spiritually blind – they can't see that He is the fulfilment of OT prophecies about a coming King who would rule over Israel with justice and righteousness.

Nicodemus seems to have come because he wants to know how to correctly interpret these signs.

Questions 4-6 are **SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS**. Let the group work on them in pairs

4. **SDL** Read v3-4. What does Jesus say and what does Nicodemus think He means?

Jesus says that we need to be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. He's explaining that belonging to the kingdom of heaven is not our right; not even for Nicodemus as a Jew – it requires spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus takes Jesus' words literally, not spiritually.

5. **SDL** Read v5-8. What do you think Jesus means?

Let the group have a go and then help them to understand. It's a difficult passage for someone who hasn't studied it before!

V5-7 – 'flesh gives birth to flesh' refers to our physical birth. The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and in order to enter it we need to be spiritually reborn, i.e. be born 'of the Spirit'.

V8 – a word-play on the Greek word pneuma (meaning wind, breath or spirit) and the Hebrew word ruach (meaning wind, breath or spirit).

6. **SDL** How does Nicodemus respond in v9? Has he understood Jesus?

Either he doesn't understand at all, or he's asking how to be born again of the Spirit (v15, when Jesus explains how to be born again, implies it's probably the latter).

Nicodemus' question might be reassuring to those who are struggling to understand the passage!

7. Why do you think Jesus expects Nicodemus to understand? (v10) What sources of information did Nicodemus have about the coming King?

He had seen (or heard about) Jesus' miracles and heard His teaching. More than that, he had the entire Jewish Scripture (our OT) which points to the coming King and kingdom.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and teacher should have understood the basic requirement of being born 'of the Spirit' in order to enter the kingdom of God.

8. Read v11-12. What response does Jesus seem to expect from His teaching?

('We' refers to Jesus and God the Father). On the assumption that people recognise Jesus' divinity, He expects them to believe His teaching. But, He says, they don't even believe Him when He explains the basics.

9. Read v 13-15. Jesus starts to teach some 'heavenly things'. What is His qualification for doing this? (v13)

He is the only human being who has been in heaven and come to earth!

10. The reference to the snake in the desert relates to Numbers 21 v 8-9, when God's people had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and were on their journey in the desert. They sinned by complaining about the journey and the food God had provided. In judgement, God sent venomous snakes which bit the people and killed them. When the Israelites repented, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and hold it up for the people to see. When someone was bitten by a snake, they looked (with faith in God's power to heal) at the bronze snake and lived.

With this in mind, what does Jesus mean when He says in v14-15 that 'the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life'?

Jesus' reference to the Son of Man being lifted up refers to His crucifixion. 'This was God's way of teaching the Israelites that healing and salvation come through trusting in God and looking at the one he has lifted up.'¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus has paid the penalty for their sins on the cross will have eternal life. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that faith in Him and in His sacrificial death is the only way to be saved.

11. Read John 3 v 16. Why did God give His only Son to die on a cross?

It's important that we take this very well-known verse in context – it directly follows v15 and leads to v17! Take some time to work through each phrase in v16 – consider God's immeasurable and unconditional love, Jesus' obedience and sacrifice and God's gift of eternal life when we trust and believe in Jesus.

12. Read v17-18. Jesus describes only two states that a person can be in. What are they and what do they hinge on?

Condemned (to death, by our sin) and saved (from the power of sin and death). It all hinges on our response to Jesus.

13. Read v19-21. Jesus moves into language of light and darkness. Who or what do the light and darkness represent?

Point back to v1 and remind the group that this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is taking place in the dark.

In context, we can see that the light represents Jesus, the Word of God. The darkness is our sinfulness and our lack of recognition of it.

¹ Moody J (2017) *John 1-12 For You*, New Malden: The Good Book Company, p59

14. Why do people love the darkness and hate the light? Can you associate with this?

We love the darkness because we are sinful. At heart, we want to do things our own way in our own time and for our own interests.

Unrepentant sinners hate the light (of God's word, i.e. Christ) because it exposes sin – we become aware of how God sees our sin and we cannot deny it's place in our lives. This is a profoundly uncomfortable experience. In rejecting the light, we reject forgiveness and salvation.

15. How do people who love the truth (God's word) feel about the light? (v21)

People who 'live by the truth' or 'live in the light of God's word' actively seek out the light of God's word and are guided by it. They want to know how to live God's way and so want to recognise their sin (this doesn't mean the process is any less uncomfortable!).

16. In what way is Jesus described in John 1 v 4-5? What does He do?

Life is in Him and that life is the light of men – in short, Jesus is described as 'light'. He shines in the darkness of our lives.

17. Read John 19 v 38-42. What does this imply about the outcome of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in the darkness in chapter 3?

It implies that Nicodemus had made some level of response to Jesus – he certainly hadn't rejected Him outright.

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Can you associate with this description of Jesus as light in the darkness of your life? Can you explain what difference this makes?

Check out – ask everyone, including leaders, how they found the study and if they are safe to go back to the cell.

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