

## Lesson Three

### The gospel of John Chapters 3 and 4

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Who is Nicodemus?

Jesus' theological discourse with Nicodemus on natural birth and spiritual birth. What is the meaning of born again?

The spiritual meaning of 'lifting up the serpent in the desert' in connection with Jesus' life and exhalation on the Cross?

Explanation of John 3:16

Jesus' theological discourse with the Samaritan woman as Life Giver and Savior of the Gentiles

Who were the Samaritans in the Bible? Church's mission to modern Samaritans who don't know Christ and how to be good Samaritans in our lives

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**Who is Nicodemus?** Nicodemus, according to the New Testament, was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He has been mentioned in three places in the Gospel of John. The limited account in John's Gospel leaves many questions about Nicodemus unanswered. Was he a true believer? What did he do after the resurrection? The Bible is silent on these questions, it appears that Nicodemus may have been a secret disciple like Joseph of Arimathea. In John's gospel, Nicodemus is presented as a man of faith in Jesus and genuine and seeker.

He first visits Jesus one night to discuss Jesus' teachings (John 3:1-21). The second time Nicodemus is mentioned, when he reminds his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that the law requires that a person be heard before being judged (John 7:50-51). Finally, Nicodemus appears after the Crucifixion of Jesus to provide the customary embalming spices, and assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39-42)

**His first meeting with Jesus:** In John 3:1, he is described as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a group of Jews who were meticulous in keeping the letter of the Law and often opposed Jesus throughout His ministry. Jesus often strongly denounced them for their legalism (Matthew 23). However, not every Pharisee was bad. There were few exceptions. Besides Nicodemus, we find apostle Paul and Gamaliel (Acts 5). The gospel mentions few occasions of Jesus being invited by the Pharisees to dine with them.

John 3:1 also describes Nicodemus as a leader of the Jews. According to John 7:50-51, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin a ruling body of the Jews. Each city could have a Sanhedrin, which functioned as the "lower courts." Under Roman authority in the time of Christ, the Jewish nation was allowed a measure of self-rule, and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was the final court of appeals for matters regarding Jewish law and religion. This was the body that ultimately condemned Jesus to death. Nicodemus was part of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

**Why he came at night?** John reports that Nicodemus came<sup>22</sup> to speak with Jesus at night. Why at night? The popular speculation is that Nicodemus was afraid of other pharisees or he was ashamed to visit Jesus in broad daylight, so he made a nighttime visit. This may very well be the case, but the text does not give a reason for the timing of the visit. A number of other reasons are also possible. Nicodemus questioned Jesus. As a member of the Jewish ruling council, it would have been his responsibility to find out about any teachers or other public figures who might lead the people astray. Since Nicodemus was a man of Sanhedrin, perhaps night time was the best time to know and learn more from Jesus. He was also aware that Jesus was a very famous preacher, teacher, healer and a large crowds followed him wherever he went. Considering Jesus' non availability to discuss some details during day time, he may have chosen night time

In their conversation, Jesus immediately confronts Nicodemus with the truth that he “must be born again” (John 3:3). When Nicodemus seems incredulous, Jesus reprimands him (perhaps gently) that, since he is a leader of the Jews, he should already know this (John 3:10). Jesus goes on to give a further explanation of the new birth, and it is in this context that we find John 3:16, which is one of the most well-known and beloved verses in the Bible.

**A theological discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus:** Nicodemus was a pious pharisee and recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah and trusted that Jesus had an answer for his question and so he had a deep theological and spiritual discourse with Jesus on the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells him that He is the kingdom of God and further said to Nicodemus that he needed a spiritual birth (birth in the Holy Spirit or Born Again ) to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus is confused and his confusion is seen in his question, “how can a person once grown old be born again? Jesus however gently points out his ignorance and guides him to know the truth about being born from above.

**What is born again?** It is a new birth, experiencing the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and heeding His message about eternal truths about Jesus as the Son of God. In the early church, the Holy Spirit was the life giver and on the day of Pentecost, the apostles received the Holy Spirit, descending upon them in the form of fire. It is their new birth, their born again experience and from then on, they became witnesses to Jesus, understood Jesus’ teaching very clearly and put into practice the mission command of Jesus before his ascension, “go and proclaim the gospel to every creature...(Mt 28:19). The apostles incorporated the essence of Jesus’ teaching in their mind and started preaching the gospel to everyone and everywhere. The Holy Spirit was the inspiration to teach and make disciples by baptizing them. The Holy Spirit activated them, guided them to lead the scattered Christians in faith and create new leaders for the new Christian communities who were filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So in order for the church to grow and blossom, the Holy Spirit was purely responsible and Jesus points out to Nicodemus that he needed that Holy Spirit to be born again.

**New life in the Holy Spirit:** It is accepting Jesus as the Light of the World, the Way, Truth and Life, consciously building the kingdom of God on earth already, living a witnessing life like the early Christian communities who were true models of charity, love and fellowship, celebrating the life and memory of Risen Christ in meaningful liturgies, having a joyful presence in the church as the mystical body of Christ, having a preferential option for the poor, needy and downtrodden, joyfully sharing our intellectual, spiritual and financial gifts and talents for the common good of the church....(Romans 12:9-21) This is the life in the Holy Spirit that Jesus asked Nicodemus to live. When we live such a life in the Holy Spirit, we will not merely be the people who gather in the physical temple instead we will be the living temples of God to one another bringing the presence of God. The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church. The feast of Pentecost is an annual invitation to the Church to look into itself and discover its soul.

*“ Without the Holy Spirit, God is distant, Christ is merely an historical figure, the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is just an organization, authority is domination, mission is propaganda, liturgy is only nostalgia, and the work of Christians is slave labor. But with the Holy Spirit, Christ is risen and present, the Gospel is a living force, the Church is a communion in the life of the Trinity, authority is a service that sets people free, mission is Pentecost, the liturgy is memory and anticipation, and the labor of Christians is divinized.” (Ignatius of Laodicea)*

The next time we encounter Nicodemus in the Bible, he is functioning in his official capacity as a member of the Sanhedrin as they consider what to do about Jesus. In John 7, some Pharisees and priests sent some of the temple guard to arrest Jesus, but they return, unable to bring themselves to do it (see John 7:32-47). The guards are upbraided by the Pharisees in authority, but Nicodemus presents the opinion that Jesus should not be condemned until they have heard from Him personally: “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:51). However, the rest of the Council rudely dismisses Nicodemus’s suggestion out of hand—they appear to have already made up their minds about Jesus.

The final mention of Nicodemus in the Bible is in John 19 after Jesus' crucifixion. We find Nicodemus assisting Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus' burial. Joseph is described in John as a rich man and in Mark 15:43 as a member of the Council. He is also described in John 19:38 as a disciple of Jesus, albeit a secret one because he was afraid of the Jews. Joseph asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus brought 75 pounds of spices for use in preparing the body for burial and then assisted Joseph in wrapping the body and placing it in the tomb. The sheer amount of burial spices would seem to indicate that Nicodemus was a rich man and that he had great respect for Jesus.

**What is the spiritual meaning of the lifting up of the serpent in the desert and Jesus being lifted up in the cross? Why is a bronze serpent used to save the Israelites in Numbers 21:8-9?"**

Throughout the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, God was constantly teaching them things about Himself and about their own sinfulness. He brought them into the wilderness, to the same mountain where He revealed Himself to Moses, so that He could instruct them in what He required of them. Shortly after the amazing events at Mt. Sinai, God brought them to the border of the Promised Land, but when the people heard the reports from the spies, their faith failed. They said that God could not overcome the giants in the land. As a result of this unbelief, God sent them into the wilderness to wander until that generation died out (Numbers 14:28-34).

In Numbers 21, the people again got discouraged, and in their unbelief, they murmured against Moses for bringing them into the wilderness. They had already forgotten that it was their own sin that caused them to be there, and they tried to blame Moses for it. As a judgment against the people for their sin, God sent poisonous serpents into the camp, and people began to die. This showed the people that they were the ones in sin, and they came to Moses to confess that sin and ask for God's mercy. When Moses prayed for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole so the people could be healed (Numbers 21:5-7).

The serpent on the stick was a reminder of their sin which brought about their suffering. There is no connection between this serpent and the serpent which Satan spoke through in the Garden of Eden. This serpent was symbolic of the serpents God used to chastise the people for their unbelief. A couple of additional lessons are taught in the Bible regarding this bronze serpent. The people did get healed when they looked at the serpent, and the image was kept for many years. Many years later, when the Israelites were in the Promised Land, the serpent became an object of worship (2 Kings 18:4). This shows how easy it is for us to take the things of God and twist them into idolatry. We must never worship the tools or the people God chooses to use, but always bring the honor and glory to God alone.

This event is given by Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3:14. Jesus indicated that this bronze serpent was a foreshadowing of Him. The serpent, a symbol of sin and judgment, was lifted up from the earth and put on a tree and those who looked at it and expressed sorrow were healed. The serpent lifted up and cursed symbolized Jesus, who takes away sin from everyone who would look to Him in faith, just like the Israelites had to look to the upraised symbol in the wilderness. Paul is reminding the Galatians that Jesus became a curse for us, although He was blameless and sinless—the spotless Lamb of God. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In short, Those doomed to die from snakebite were healed by obeying God's command to look up at the elevated bronze snake. Similarly, we are saved when we look up to Jesus, believing as our Savior.

**Exposition of John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.**

This verse is without a doubt one of the most popular and well-known Bible verses in the Christian world. It provides the core context of the Christian gospel, revealing the fact that God so intensely loved humanity that He sent His son to die on the cross to save mankind from its sin. The entire gospel comes to a focus in this verse. God's love is not static or self-centered. It reaches out and draws others in. Here God sets the pattern of true love, the basis for all love relationship: when we love someone dearly, we should be willing to give freely to the point of self-sacrifice. God paid dearly with the life of his Son, the highest price he could pay. Jesus accepted our punishment, paid the price for our sins and then offered us the new life that he had bought for us. When we share the gospel with others, our love must be like Jesus - willingly giving up our own comfort and security so that others might join us in receiving God's love.

St. Augustine says it more succinctly: "Love God and do what you will." This famous quote from Augustine of Hippo (534-430) is commonly interpreted to mean if we love God, then what He wants will become what we want and what we want will invariably be what He wants. Thus, if we want it, whatever it might be, it is within the will of God.

**How do we apply John 3:16 to our lives?** The John 3:16 meaning is simple and clear: Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity, willingly offering to make a sacrifice to save the world. It is a gift, freely given to any man or woman who chooses to accept it and it comes with a wonderful benefit: everlasting life in heaven. It's a simple decision to make a commitment to follow Christ. Like any other relationship, it's an ongoing commitment to embracing and living out the simple truths in John 3:16. Accepting Jesus and his sacrifice — along with prayer, reading scripture and studying God and His monumental love for His creation — will fully prepare us to live out the John 3:16 message in full form.

**Samaritan woman:** Who were the Samaritans? After the northern kingdom, with its capital Samaria, fell to the Assyrians, many Jews were deported to Assyria and foreigners were brought in to settle the land and they lived with the remaining Israelites (2 Kings 17:24). The intermarriage between those foreigners and the remaining Jews resulted in a mixed race. The Jews in the Southern kingdom considered this mixing as an impure and thus the pure Jews hated this mixed race and called them Samaritans because they felt that their fellow Jews who had intermarried had betrayed their people and nation. So what we need to know is that the Samaritans were originally the Jews. The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans grew in all aspects. The Jews would not accept them in their religious worship places and that is why the Samaritans had to set up an alternate center for worship on Mount Gerizim to parallel the temple at Jerusalem. (Their temple was destroyed even before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple). The Jews did everything they could to avoid traveling through Samaria. When the Samaritans wanted to help the Jews to reconstruct the temple under the leadership of Nehemiah, the Jews would not accept even their help (Ezra 4). Even during Jesus' time this hatred, bitterness and enmity were very strong. Even the disciples of Jesus hated them. The hatred can be easily understood from the words of the apostle John who said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans?" (Luke 9:54) But Jesus had a different perspective of the Samaritans. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus presents the Samaritan as a compassionate, kind and caring person for the wounded Jew to whom the Samaritans were untouchables.

In this episode, Jesus presents the Samaritan woman as the one deserving grace no matter what she had been before. Jesus went beyond the cultural restrictions of his time. Wells were almost always located outside the city along the main road. Jacob's well was on the property, originally owned by Jacob (Gen 33:18-19). Twice each day, morning and evening, women came to draw water. This woman came at noon, probably to avoid meeting people who knew her reputation as a sinner. Secondly, she was an untouchable to the Jews. No respectable Jewish man would talk to a woman under such circumstances. But Jesus did. The gospel is for

every person, no matter what his or her race, social position or past sins. We must be prepared to share the gospel at any time and in any place as Jesus crossed all barriers to share the gospel

The tiresome and thirsty Jesus initiated personal dialogue with her asking, "Woman, where is your husband?" The woman said, "I don't have a husband." Jesus said, "I know. You have had five husbands and you are messing up with the sixth guy." Jesus' knowledge about her personal life would have been a great embarrassment for her but the intention of Jesus was not to shame her publicly but to make her aware of her immediate need. What did she need? She needed life giving water from Jesus, not physical water from the well. The amazing part of the conversation is neither condemnation nor judgment for her immoral life but tenderness and compassion for her. And this is the way Jesus dealt with so many sinners like Zacchaeus the chief tax collector, woman caught in the act of adultery. Love for the sinner, no condemnation absolutely and at the same time not condoning the sinful life. This is what we do towards those who are away from God and Christian faith and Morals. And that is the way that Jesus feels about us. Jesus loves us in spite of our sinfulness that does not mean he condones our sinful behavior. He did not condone the sins of the woman and he does not condone us when we commit sin. What he does during our sinful moment is giving what we need at that moment. Jesus does not condemn her. The simple reason is that she has already condemned her sinful life in her heart. So instead of condemnation, Jesus offers his compassion and understanding towards her by giving life giving water.

The second insight that we must notice in this story is Jesus' personal knowledge about each of us. We can cheat people but not God who knows the ins and outs of each of us even before we were born. When Jesus became personal with her and started asking embarrassing questions about her five husbands, she tried to cleverly change the subject and talk about religion. She didn't want Jesus to get into her personal stuff but Jesus wanted to free her, forgive her and shape her life in a new direction. Jesus wanted to offer this woman the living water. And that is the way God works with us. Jesus comes into our personal lives, not to embarrass us, not to judge us, not to condemn us but to free us and change us and offer us what we really need: living water.

**But what is this living water?** Jesus is the living water and the Samaritan woman not only accepted Jesus as the prophet but also became an instrument to bring many Samaritans to accept Jesus as their Messiah (Jn 4:39-42). Jesus is our living water to quench our spiritual thirst. The living word, Jesus Christ, and the written word, the Bible can satisfy our hungry and thirsty souls. When we read and meditate his eternal word, when we pray, receive him in the Holy Communion, when we turn to his mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation we receive living water from Jesus. As our bodies hunger and thirst, so do our souls. But our souls need spiritual food and water.

**What does it mean to worship the Lord in spirit and truth?** The idea of worshipping the Lord "in spirit and truth" comes from Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4:6-30. In the conversation, the woman was discussing places of worship with Jesus, saying that the Jews worshiped at Jerusalem, while the Samaritans worshiped at Mount Gerizim. Jesus had just revealed that He knew about her many husbands, as well as the fact that the current man she lived with was not her husband. This made her uncomfortable, so she attempted to divert His attention from her personal life to matters of religion. Jesus refused to be distracted from His lesson on true worship and got to the heart of the matter: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to worship Him" (John 4:23).

The overall lesson about worshipping the Lord in spirit and truth is that worship of God is not to be confined to a single geographical location or necessarily regulated by the temporary provisions of Old Testament law. With the coming of Christ, the separation between Jew and Gentile was no longer relevant, nor was the centrality of the temple in worship. With the coming of Christ, all of God's children gained equal access to God through Him. Worship became a matter of the heart, not external actions, and directed by truth rather than ceremony. (Pandemic time is a time to worship God in Spirit and Truth)

True worship must be “in spirit,” that is, engaging the whole heart. Unless there’s a real passion for God, there is no worship in spirit. At the same time, worship must be “in truth,” that is, properly informed. Unless we have knowledge of the God we worship, there is no worship in truth. Both are necessary for God-honoring worship. Truth without spirit can result in a dry, passionless encounter that can easily lead to a form of joyless legalism. The best combination of both aspects of worship results in a joyous appreciation of God informed by Scripture. The more we know about God, the more we appreciate Him. The more we appreciate, the deeper our worship. The deeper our worship, the more God is glorified.

**What was Jesus’ mission? Why did Jesus come?** Several times in Jesus’ life, He shows that He was a man on a mission. He had a purpose, which He intentionally fulfilled. Even at a young age, Jesus knew that He “must be about [His] Father’s business” (Luke 2:49, KJV). In the last days of His earthly life, Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem,” where He knew He would be killed (Luke 9:51). It could be said that the fundamental mission of Christ’s time on earth was to fulfill God’s plan of saving the lost.

Jesus put it this way in Luke 19:10: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus had just been criticized for going to the house of a “sinner.” Jesus responded by affirming His mission was to save people who needed saving. Their reputation for sinfulness was not a reason to avoid them; rather, it was a reason to seek them out. Many times during Christ’s ministry, He sought to forgive those whom the self-righteous leaders of the day shunned. He sought out and saved the woman at the well and the Samaritans of her town (John 4:39-41), the sinful woman with the alabaster jar (Luke 7:37), and even one of His own disciples, Matthew, who had been a tax collector (Matthew 9:9).

In Matthew 9, once again Jesus was criticized for “eating with tax collectors and sinners” (verse 11), and once again Jesus responded by stating His mission: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (verse 13). Jesus’ goal was to save. It was a goal that He reached: “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4).

All through the Gospels, we see Jesus call to repentance and forgive the worst of sinners. No one is too sinful to come to Him. In fact, He goes after those who are lost, as the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin show (Luke 15:1-10). In the story of the prodigal son, Jesus teaches that God will always welcome with open arms those who come to Him with a repentant heart (Luke 15:21-22; cf. Isaiah 57:15). Even today, Jesus continues to seek and save those who humbly place their faith in Him (Matthew 11:29; 18:3-4; Revelation 3:20). “The church is not a club of saints but a hospital of sinners”

**Church’s multicultural mission:** The Bible does not use the phrase “world missions,” but God is certainly missions-minded (Luke 19:10), and His love extends to all the world (John 3:16). The salvation of all nations is a concern for every Christian, based on the Sacred Scripture. First World missions is important because God is the Creator of all people; second, God cares about all people equally; and, third, God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth about Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:4). Because of God’s attitude toward the people of the whole world, we know that world missions—the evangelization of all the people of the world—is a worthy goal.

Eventually, Paul’s missionary work took him to Europe. Always, Paul strived to be a pioneer in world missions: “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation” (Romans 15:20). Paul preached the gospel “from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum” (verse 19); he had plans to go to Spain (verse 24), and he eventually made it to Rome. The book of Acts showcases the missionary fervor of the early church and emphasizes the necessity of world missions.

**Inculturation in the catholic church:** Inculturation refers to the adaptation of church doctrine and ritual to unreached or non-Christian cultures. In Catholicism, inculturation involves the adaptation of the liturgy to different cultures other than Christians. When the apostle Paul tried to evangelize the Greeks in Athens, he was involved in inculturation to a certain extent (Acts 17:22-33). Paul began by noting that the Greeks had an altar dedicated to “the unknown god” at which they worshiped. In this way Paul related to the Greeks and their culture. From there he moved to the truth about their “unknown” deity, proclaiming the reality of the God who created them and provided for their salvation. Paul also quoted some philosophers of the day (Acts 17:28) in order to further bolster his message.

**Anecdote:** John Geddie was a great Presbyterian missionary with full of zeal and enthusiasm. He was born in Scotland but raised in Nova Scotia , Canada and lived with his wife Charlotte and his children. In the year 1848, he was sent as a missionary. He with his family sailed for eleven months and reached a remote island called Aneityum near Australia. Upon his arrival, he realized that his life in the island would not be very easy. People who lived there were ignorant, wicked killing each other like cannibals and eating the dead bodies of human beings. Lot of deadly disease was there. Tribal language was another challenge for him. He started learning their language in order to communicate the message of Jesus from the bible. He put up small school to teach. When he traveled the forests, the native people threw stones and spears at him and he was hurt. He got so discouraged. After 5 years of his hard labor in the island, there were tangible signs of faith growing in those tribal chiefs who decided to convert to Christianity. Suddenly the churches were overflowing. Little Aneiteum sent missionaries to other islands nearby because John Geddie had always insisted that every convert should be responsible to share their faith with others. Interestingly people of one island upon hearing the transformation which the gospel made sent over a pig with which to buy a Christian missionary. After 16 years of their coming to Aneiteum, John and his family returned to Canada for a vacation and they toured the nation telling of their work. While home, John translated the Psalms into the Aneiteum language as the island people demanded more bibles. John Geddie died in 1872. A memorial stone was placed in his memory which said, "When John Geddie landed in 1848, there were no Christians here and when he left in 1872 there were no heathen". He made a great difference in the life of the people. He was a tree planted by God in an island. The tree flourished and bore fruits in the house of God.