

Lesson 1

Dec. 7, 2025

Jesus Lifted Up

Christ's sacrificial death on the cross secured our eternal salvation.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson examines Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a teacher of the Jews, as recorded in John 3. In this chapter, Jesus tells him, "You must be born again" (v. 7), revealing the necessity of a spiritual new birth. These words highlight God's purpose in sending His son – to save and transform all who believe in Him. The passage emphasizes that this new birth is a divine work of the Holy Spirit, redirecting an individual's life as a walk of faith. We will delve into the profound implications of Jesus' life-changing message and Nicodemus' struggle to grasp its meaning. The lesson offers insights into the spiritual renewal of a Christian's life through faith.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Just prior to meeting Nicodemus, Jesus had driven the merchants and moneychangers from the temple (John 2:13-16). Following this, many people believed in Him because of the miracles He performed. However, as the Apostle John notes, Jesus did not entrust Himself to them "because He knew all men" (2:24). Jesus discerned the true intentions and hearts of these apparent believers and did not place His confidence in their superficial faith. John's statement emphasizes Jesus' divine insight into human nature, setting the stage for the profound dialogue with Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a teacher of Israel.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. THE HOLY SPIRIT BIRTHS SPIRITUAL LIFE: John 3:1-8.

- A. A New Birth (1-7)
- B. A New Direction (8)

2. CHRIST LIFTED UP FORESHADOWED: John 3:9-15.

- A. A New Perspective (9-13)
- B. A New Focus (14-15)

3. ACCEPT SALVATION; ENTER THE LIGHT: John 3:16-21.

- A. A New Destiny (16-18)
- B. A New Character (19-21)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. THE HOLY SPIRIT BIRTHES SPIRITUAL LIFE: John 3:1-8.

A. A New Birth, John 3:1-7

Nicodemus came to Jesus, admitting He was a teacher sent from God because of the signs He had performed, but his real question was whether Jesus was a prophet or the Messiah. This explained Jesus' response that to see the kingdom of God, a person must be born again. The Greek word translated as "again" also meant "from above," which was how John used it elsewhere in his Gospel (3:31; 19:11). Nicodemus misunderstood, thinking Jesus referred to a second natural birth, but Jesus was speaking of a new birth from above, signifying a new, spiritual birth that resulted in eternal life. This spiritual transformation would enable a person to recognize the true Messiah and enter God's kingdom.

Jesus further explained that a person must be "born of water and of the Spirit" (v. 5) to enter the kingdom of God. What does Jesus mean by the phrase "born of water"? In John's Gospel, water is mentioned twice previously: in the baptism of John (1:19-34) and the miracle at Cana (2:1-11). In the first instance, John the Baptist indicated that the purpose of his baptism was to prepare people for the coming Christ. "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (1:29). In John 2, Jesus turned water into wine as a sign that pointed to His glory as the Son of God, who would change the rituals of the Jewish religion into a spiritual encounter with God. In both instances, water was used to point to the identity of Jesus. As such, to be born of water, as Jesus stated in chapter 3, would occur through faith in Jesus as the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.

B. A New Direction John 3:8

In a profound conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus revealed how spiritual birth profoundly transforms a person's life. Jesus compared the born-again life in the Spirit with the wind: Though the wind is unseen, it is a powerful force that moves those who respond to it. The Greek word *pneuma*, meaning both wind and spirit, expresses this mystery. Like the wind's uncontrollable path, the Spirit can redirect lives in ways beyond human understanding. Without making a sound, the voice of the Spirit provides guidance, urging believers toward their divine purpose. Like wind in the sails of a boat on the sea, the power of the Holy Spirit can take us to a divine destination.

Nicodemus, a scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, should have recognized the deep connection to Genesis. Like the Greek word *pneuma*, the Hebrew word *ruach* also means spirit, breath, or breath of life. In Genesis 1:2, the passage speaks of both water and the Spirit at the time of Creation. Likewise, Jesus told Nicodemus that a new birth requires both water and Spirit, symbolizing creation and life, reinforcing the concept of being "born again" or "born from above" (CEV). The new birth signifies more than a personal transformation – it echoes a new creation where old things pass away, and all becomes new (2 Corinthians 5:17). Empowered by the Spirit, believers yield to God's purpose for their lives, with their paths shaped by divine direction. This timeless truth continues to inspire faith and renewal today.

Jesus compared the Holy Spirit to the wind, an unseen yet powerful force that gently guides and shapes a Christian's life. Just as the wind moves through the trees or fills the sails of a boat, the Spirit works invisibly but undeniably, directing Christians toward God's purpose. It whispers wisdom in moments of uncertainty, providing clarity and peace when decisions feel overwhelming. It cannot be controlled or contained like the wind, yet its presence is unmistakable, refreshing the soul and breathing life into weary hearts. The Holy Spirit nudges us

toward love, kindness, and truth, much like a soft breeze steering us onto the right path. Even in life's storms, His guidance remains steady, reminding us God is near. By staying attuned to this divine wind, Christians can navigate life's journey with faith and confidence in God's plan.

2. CHRIST LIFTED UP FORESHADOWED: John 3:9-15

A. A New Perspective John 3:9-13

Nicodemus continued to be in the dark about what Jesus was saying, and Jesus was amazed that this teacher and leader of the people was so spiritually blind. Ironically, the teacher (Nicodemus) became the student in the presence of the Master. Nicodemus' perspective was earthly, with his mind bound to what could be perceived through the five senses and rational thought. He needed a new perspective, one that would allow him to see things from Jesus' point of view from above. However, this change of perspective required a new birth, which Nicodemus could not comprehend. As the One who descended from Heaven, Jesus is the only person qualified to accurately explain "heavenly things" (v. 12). Jesus testified to what He had seen regarding God and His kingdom. Nicodemus struggled to comprehend or believe Jesus' testimony; consequently, he failed to grasp who Jesus was or understand what He was saying about the new birth.

At the end of chapter 2, Jesus did not entrust Himself to those who "believed" in Him (vv. 23-24); this passage helps clarify why. Even a teacher of the Law struggled to grasp the spiritual nature of God's kingdom or fully believe Jesus' words. If such a leader lacked understanding, how could the crowds recognize the truth? Jesus explained the necessity of being born again using "earthly terms (3:12), presenting the concept as simply as possible. Despite this, both Jewish leaders and common people frequently misunderstood His teachings, which hindered their ability to believe.

B. A New Focus John 3:14-15.

To ignite Nicodemus' faith, Jesus shifted the focus of their conversation, urging him to embrace a higher perspective: the vision of the Son of Man being lifted up. Drawing from a familiar Old Testament story, Jesus referenced the account of Moses and the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:1-9). In this account, God sent poisonous snakes as a judgment on the Israelites for their complaints and lack of faith. Their repentance led them to seek deliverance, and God instructed Moses to craft a bronze serpent and elevate it on a pole. Those who looked on the serpent in faith were saved from death, symbolizing both judgment and divine mercy.

Similarly, Jesus explained to Nicodemus that He must be "lifted up" (v. 4) to bring salvation to humanity. Jesus didn't say it, but surely, He was referring to the cross. Just as the bronze serpent represented Israel's sin and God's judgment, Jesus embodied humanity's sin and bore its consequences on the cross. The Apostle Paul reinforced this truth, writing, "For he [God] hath made his [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). By turning their gaze to Christ crucified, individuals can experience spiritual rebirth and redemption. The significance of this message seems to have eventually become clear to Nicodemus, as evidenced by his later actions in assisting with Jesus' burial (John 19:39), suggesting that he ultimately grasped the profound implications of Jesus' words.

When Jesus spoke of being "born again," Nicodemus misunderstood, limited by literal thinking. This moment reveals the tension between earthly logic and divine truths – a struggle that

continues to this day. We often grapple with spiritual concepts, trying to fit infinite wisdom into finite reasoning. Jesus shifted the focus from understanding truths to living them. Loving one's enemies, practicing humility, and trusting in God's unseen plans often seem overwhelming, but the answer is to apply faith, not just grasp God's truths intellectually. Nicodemus' confusion mirrors our struggle between belief and action, which is where true growth happens.

3. ACCEPT SALVATION; ENTER THE LIGHT John 3:16-21

A. A New Destiny John 3:16-18

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is crucial because it points to the decision (faith in Jesus Christ) that determines a person's eternal destiny. At this point, Nicodemus appears to be unable to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Yet without this faith, he will perish. John, however, introduces the one decisive element that can change the destiny of Nicodemus: God's unfailing love for the world. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus failed to see this, although the Old Testament clearly points to it. For example, in Exodus 34:6-7, God reveals Himself to Moses as a God who is "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." This is the Gospel Jesus proclaimed and embodied. Nicodemus' failure to believe is even more astounding in the light of this. Paul, the former Pharisee, came to understand the Gospel of grace, writing, "God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4 NKJV).

The Pharisees were often known for condemning others to elevate their own righteousness, as seen in Luke 18:9-14. In contrast, God's mission through Jesus Christ was centered on salvation, not judgment. John 3:17 highlights that the incarnation - the Word becoming flesh - was meant to bring forgiveness and hope. Sin places the unbeliever in a state of condemnation, but Jesus came to offer forgiveness and transformation through His sacrifice. He proclaimed the life-changing truth of the Gospel, emphasizing God's boundless, redeeming love. By prioritizing grace, Jesus revealed the path to salvation, offering all an opportunity to embrace God's mercy and eternal life. This message of hope is at the heart of the Christian faith, calling believers to share the good news of God's love and forgiveness rather than condemning others. In doing so, they reflect Christ's ministry and invite others into His redemptive promise.

B. A New Character John 3:19-21

Finally, Jesus points to a central result of the new birth in the Spirit: a new character. To be born from above is to transition from the dark world of evil into the glorious kingdom of light and truth and thereby enter the kingdom of God (3:5). Jesus, as the Word of God, has brought life and light into the world (1:4). Despite God's love for the world, however, people in Jesus' day loved the darkness "because their deeds were evil" (3:19). This is the reason for the stubborn unbelief of many people in John's Gospel. They rejected the light because it revealed their evil deeds. Whereas God loved the world and sent the light through His only begotten Son, the world loved darkness.

However, those born from above love the light because the truth guides their actions. Truth not only characterizes a person's beliefs, but it also directs a person's words and actions. In his first letter, the Apostle John points out that the message he and the other disciples received from

Jesus and shared with other – “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Therefore, if anyone claims to have a relationship with God but continues to live in darkness, they are being dishonest and not living according to the truth. However, if they “walk [live] in the light, as He is in the light,” they are united with one another, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies them “from all sin” (vv.6-7).

To “walk in the light as God is in the light” means to live a life of truth, purity, and fellowship with Him and others. It involves aligning our actions, thoughts, and intentions with God’s character, which is holy and righteous. Walking in the light requires honesty about our sins, confessing them openly to God, and allowing His forgiveness to cleanse us. It’s about pressing toward the mark set by Christ and striving to live in a close relationship with Him. When we walk in the light, we reflect God’s love and grace to those around us, building genuine connections rooted in kindness and integrity. This path fosters unity among believers as we share in the joy of fellowship with one another and with Christ. Ultimately, walking in the light means embracing a life of hope, guided by God’s truth and illuminated by His unwavering presence.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

As Christians, we should remember our salvation was made possible through Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross. Through faith in Him, we experience the new birth in the Spirit.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Reflect on a key takeaway from the lesson and consider how it can deepen your relationship with the Lord. This week, use it as an opportunity to share Jesus with someone and invite them to church.

WORKSHEET

The Unique Gospel According to John

Saying Something is Unique means it is one of a kind, having distinctive characteristics that it alone has. This is true of the Gospel written by the Apostle John in the New Testament.

As Readers of the New Testament know, there are four accounts of the Gospel in the New Testament: by Matthew, by Mark, by Luke, and by John. The first three Gospels, as they are arranged in the New Testament, have long been called “the Synoptic Gospels,” while the Gospel by John is in a category all to itself.

According to the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, synoptic means: “presenting or taking the same or common view ... of or relating to the first three Gospels of the New Testament.” This means the Synoptic Gospels contain essentially the same contents regarding the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ; although each one does contain some content not found in the others.

Most of the Contents of the Gospel by John are found only in this Gospel. This does not mean John’s Gospel contradicts the other Gospels; it does not. Rather, the Gospel by John supplements and complements the Synoptic Gospels, providing additional information about the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus we would not have without the Gospel by John.

All of the Seven Lesson Texts for the Current Unit of Seven Lessons on the Gospel by John contain information about Jesus’ life, ministry, and teachings found only in John’s Gospel. None of this information is found in the Synoptic Gospels, but it adds to, and greatly enriched, what we know about Jesus.

Like the Lessons, the information Sheets for this unit of lessons are focused on information in John’s Gospel not found in the Synoptic Gospels, and also not dealt with in this unit of lessons on the Gospel by John. All of this together will reveal how unique and valuable John’s Gospel is for all who hear, receive, believe, and live by the Gospel. God be thanked and praised for the Synoptic Gospels, and for the Gospel According to John.

A Pole and The Cross

Compare and contrast the uplifted pole in Numbers 21:7-9 with the cross on which Jesus died.

1. Why did Moses create the pole with the snake on it?
2. Who received help from this creation, and how?
3. What did Jesus call Himself in John 3:13, and why?
4. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be “lifted up” (v. 14)?
5. Who receives help from Jesus’ sacrifice, and how (v. 15)?