

# LESSON ONE

## *Respond to God's Love*

### FOCAL TEXT

John 3:1–16

### BACKGROUND

John 3:1–21

### MAIN IDEA

In love, God offers you eternal life if you will respond to Jesus, God's Son, whom God gave so that you might be saved.

### QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

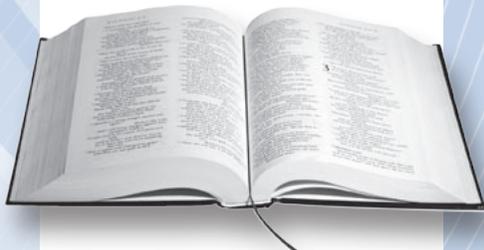
How does God want you to respond to what God has done for you?

### STUDY AIM

To respond to God's love by trusting in Jesus or to testify of how I have responded to God's love by trusting in Jesus

### QUICK READ

Jesus' message of God's love is simple to understand for those people who sense the stirring breeze of God's Spirit in their lives and choose to respond positively to it.



Sam was somewhat stooped by his ninety-one years. He was dearly loved and respected by everyone who knew him. Even his peers referred to him as “Mr. Sam.” He had been asked to share his basic philosophy of life with a group of young adults. He sat before the young adults one Sunday morning, opened his well-used Bible to 1 John 4:7–10, and started to read in a slow, yet steady tone, “Dear friends, Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Upon finishing his reading, Mr. Sam looked out at the group of young adults and said, “My life only has meaning because of the love of God. If you find anything at all in my life that is honorable or admirable, it is due to the love of God.” He then said words that are still repeated by this group of young adults: “Before it is anything else, love is a choice. For you to love, you must choose to respond positively to God’s love.”

## JOHN 3:1–16

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

<sup>3</sup>In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

<sup>4</sup>“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup>You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup>The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell

where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

<sup>10</sup>“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

## The Love of God

Society suggests, *Love is a feeling you feel when you feel a feeling you have never felt before.* Yet, a stirring within the human spirit desires for love to be more than an emotion that is dependent on momentary whims. People desire for love to be more than temporarily tangible. In every human dwells a deep desire for love to be spiritually substantive and transcendent. There is a desire to find love at the core of life, not at its periphery. People long for love to be invigorating in the most important aspects of their lives. Humans desire for love to be a steady stream of living water that renews and nourishes and never changes in its essence.

“God is love,” wrote John. Of all the characteristics God could have chosen to be the central ingredient in God’s own being, God chose love. This must be the answer to the question Job asked in the midst of his suffering, “What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention?” (Job 7:17).

Jesus Christ calls his followers to the depths of faith in the midst of a shallow world. While the world wants to point merely to flowers and birds and speak of the love of God, Christ’s church points to the most despicable sins and impulses of humanity and says, *God’s love is bigger than that.* In a world that wants to focus on entertainment and

excitement, Christ calls people to focus on the eternal truths revealed in the love of God.

God is love. As height, depth, and breadth are used to help us understand the dimensions of the tangible, so grace, mercy, forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, joy, peace, and hope are used to explain the dimensions of the spiritual. “God is love,” exclaims John. God is expressed through a variety of dimensions; yet, each reflects love.

### Responding to God’s Love Is a Possibility for Everyone and Anyone (3:1–2)

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Have you heard the good news? No matter what you have done—or not done; no matter who you are—or are not; you can experience the love of God. You cannot experience the love of God just because you decide you want to do so. However, you can respond to the stirring of the Spirit within you that creates a thirst to know God in a personal relationship. You can respond to God’s love no matter who or what you have been.

John 3 introduces us to a story of one person’s encounter with Jesus as an *after-dark story*. In some stories, Jesus went to people. In other stories, Jesus stopped by people along the path. In this story, Nicodemus “came to Jesus” (John 3:2).

To some extent Nicodemus represents the old understanding of religion, the pre-Christ perspective. It is significant that Nicodemus approached Jesus under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. He was an extremely influential person in Jerusalem. Had he approached Jesus in the middle of the day, among the people, this experience and the conversation could have been entirely different.

We are not told whether this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus was pre-arranged or serendipitous. We are not even told why Nicodemus approached Jesus. What we are told is that Jesus saw into Nicodemus’s life and discerned that the Pharisee was looking for spiritual light, although he approached Jesus in the darkness.

Clearly Nicodemus and other influential religious leaders were listening to and noticing the ministry of Jesus. Possibly Nicodemus was reporting conclusions reached among the religious leaders of Jerusalem when he said, “we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For

no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (3:2).

Most likely, the religious leaders thought they had figured out God's ways. In their minds, God worked through insightful teachers and miracle workers. This was part of Israel's history. They could point to numerous teachers, prophets, and miraculous moments through which God had shaped their history. No doubt, Nicodemus sensed that Jesus reflected this same line of divine revelation. It had not occurred to Nicodemus, though, that a whole new spiritual experience was being revealed in the person of Jesus. There was a stirring of the Spirit in Nicodemus. A new wind was blowing, and it caused a fresh breeze in Nicodemus. He “came to Jesus” (3:2).

### Responding to God's Love Requires a New Birth (3:3–8)

Early in Nicodemus's conversation with Jesus, he heard a new idea and a new phrase, *born again*. Do you remember the first time you heard the

## FREEDOM—AND RESPONSIBILITY— TO EXPRESS FAITH

One tradition of Christian practice that emerged during the Protestant Reformation was a movement called Anabaptism. Anabaptists taught there must be a conscious decision to commit one's life to Jesus as Lord of one's life. They rejected infant baptism and practiced believer's baptism. They were called *Ana-Baptists*, meaning to *baptize again* (*ana* means *again*). Later, the earliest Baptists, around 1611, embraced the principle of soul competency, the idea that a person's faith is based on a conscious commitment to Christ as Lord rather than a mental affirmation of creedal or doctrinal uniformity.

Baptists have historically embraced the idea that every human is created in the image of God, has the freedom of choosing to express faith in Jesus Christ or not, and thus also is accountable to God for his or her decision. Baptists have been careful to embrace the freedom of the person to respond to God's love and have emphasized the need for a faith commitment through a spiritual new birth.

phrase? Has it been part of your spiritual language ever since you can remember? In the southern United States, this phrase is common among Baptists. However, if you did not grow up Baptist, or if your roots are not in the southern states, you may have first learned the phrase when you dated a Baptist during high school. Or, you may have been introduced to the phrase when it was used to describe narrow-minded students during your college years. Has the term *born again* always had a good connotation in your mind? Would you describe yourself to your neighbors and co-workers as a *born-again* Christian?

When Jimmy Carter was elected president of the United States in 1976, he identified himself as a born-again Christian. Prior to Jimmy Carter, the White House press had never expressed so much interest in the phrase, *born again*. Now we hear the phrase more often in the media.

This phrase, *born again*, is a metaphor we use to describe the spiritual new birth that occurs when a person experiences God through the love revealed in Jesus Christ. This response to God's love transforms human lives and transforms the world. The Greek word often translated *born again* can also be translated *born from above*. To respond to the love of God is to be born through the Spirit of God into a personal relationship with God, as revealed in Christ.

Nicodemus, true to form for a man who carefully followed each detail of the law, focused on the earthly implications and limitations communicated by the idea of being born again. Yet, Jesus was pointing Nicodemus to consider the spiritual perspective of a new birth. Isn't that just like Jesus to push a person toward a perspective higher than the earthly viewpoint?

## CONTRASTS IN JOHN 3:1–21

Note the contrasts in John 3:1–21:

- Light with darkness (Night)
- Above with below
- Spirit with flesh
- Heavenly with earthly
- Life with death
- Saved with condemned
- Love with hate

For a person to experience the love and power of the kingdom of God, a new birth from above is necessary. On the one hand, Nicodemus was correct. It is impossible for a person to be reborn as a physical person. Yet, Jesus called Nicodemus to a higher realm of understanding. It is possible for a person to be reborn as a spiritual person. Only God, the eternal Holy Spirit, can give a new birth to a person, as the person believes in Christ.

### Responding to God's Love Is Both Confusing and Simple (3:9–16)

Nicodemus would have understood Jesus' words about a new birth if Jesus had described a list of external behaviors or expectations. If, in order to be a follower of Jesus, a person needed to fulfill certain obligations, as in the case of a Gentile who chose to become a Jew, Nicodemus would have made a note, nodded his head, and returned to the Sanhedrin with a report. Yet, while Jesus' revelation of the love of God was simple to understand, Nicodemus was confused by his message.

Nicodemus belonged to the group of Jewish leaders who observed every aspect of the Torah, that is, the Jewish law. This group eventually both led and redefined Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 70. Yet, here Jesus was almost mocking Nicodemus's lack of spiritual understanding. You could paraphrase Jesus,

You are one of the brightest minds in all Israel and you cannot understand the simple spiritual truths I am saying to you. Nicodemus, if you cannot understand my explanation of this new birth when I use earthly metaphorical language, how in the world do you expect to understand me if I use spiritual language?

For centuries, children, youth, and adults in almost every culture around the world have responded to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Is it because Jesus' message is simple? Yes, Jesus' message of God's love is quite simple to understand for those people who sense the stirring breeze of God's Spirit within their spirit and choose to respond positively. In fact, God's love, revealed in Jesus, is taught in John 3:16 and is memorized by people in thousands of languages: "For God so loved

the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

### Implications and Actions

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Jesus also taught, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35). The love of God must affect the way we live in relationship with one another. Once we have been *born from above*, our lives must reflect God’s love to others. We respond to God’s love by being *born from above*. And, we respond to God’s love as we ourselves love one another.

### QUESTIONS

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1. What experience have you had of responding to God’s love and being *born again* or being *born from above*? How would you describe it to another person?
2. What are some reasons it can be so difficult for some people to understand this idea of a spiritual new birth?
3. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again [*born from above*]” (3:3). How do you feel about these words? Do they compel you to share your faith with others? Do they inspire you to pay closer attention to the implications of your witness or your character in relationship to others?
4. Is it possible to sense evidence in a person’s life as to whether the person has experienced a spiritual new birth? If not, why not? If so, what evidence do you identify?
5. How does a person’s life change once he or she responds positively to God’s love?