

LESSON ONE
*Respond to
God's Love*

FOCAL TEXT

John 3:1–16

BACKGROUND

John 3:1–21

MAIN IDEA

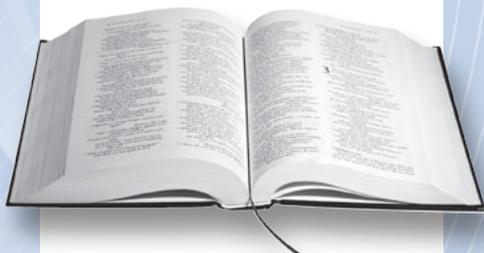
In love, God offers you eternal life if you will respond to Jesus, God's Son, whom God gave so that you might be saved.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

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

TEACHING AIM

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



UNIT ONE
Beginning the Journey

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

John wrote his Gospel so that people might believe in Jesus and have eternal life in him (John 20:31). The focus for today's lesson, responding to God's love, is a person's response to John's witness to Jesus. John's Gospel unfolds the reality of, the entrance into, and the meaning of eternal life.¹

One way John witnessed to Jesus was to recount the "signs" of Jesus. A sign in John's Gospel was a miracle performed by Jesus in which the miracle pointed beyond itself to the One, namely Jesus, who was greater still. Our focal text is linked to the first sign Jesus performed. The "first of his signs" (2:11) was to turn water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (2:1–11). The "six stone water jars" (2:6) represented unfulfilled Jewish expectations. By having the jars filled up, Jesus declared he was the One who would fulfill the Jewish expectations for the saving deliverance they expected to come from God. Wine symbolized the abundance of life that Jesus came to bring.

The wine was new, symbolizing that Jesus brought new life and new beginning to people. The Jews expected God to break into history at some point to make a new beginning for his people. This new beginning was to be the rule of God as he established a whole new kingdom (a new order) altogether. So this first sign signified that the new beginning had come in Jesus Christ.

The message is that Christ not only makes a new people, but also that he makes a new order: everything is being ordered under his rule (see Matthew 28:18, where Jesus has received all power in heaven and earth). Since Jesus' way is a new order, a new life, and a new way of being, his way is a new beginning for all who follow him.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Nicodemus at Night (3:1–2)

3:1. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a teacher of the law. Sadducees and Pharisees made up the bulk of the religious establishment and influence among the Jews. Since the Sadducees primarily centered their activity in the temple, their greatest influence was in relationship to Jerusalem, the temple, and the sacrificial system. Pharisees were laymen with their bases of operations in the synagogues. The Pharisees, since there were many synagogues in Palestine and beyond, extended their sphere of influence wherever enough Jews were present to form a synagogue. Many Pharisees were good people, not so much self-righteous as committed to the renewal and liberation of Israel through faithfulness to the traditions of the law. At times, their commitment to the law sank into legalism, which actually became a barrier to their appropriating the revelation of God, especially the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus the Christ. Many of them did not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

3:2. Nicodemus had heard and watched Jesus in action. He saw that Jesus was different. Obviously Jesus was not crazy or simply another would-be messiah with his own agenda. Somehow Nicodemus sensed that Jesus followed God's agenda. The best way for Nicodemus to explain Jesus was that he was a "teacher who has come from God." Having seen and heard Jesus, the Pharisee wanted to know more.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by "night." Interpreters give several suggestions for understanding "night." Nicodemus may have come simply because the workday was over, and night was a convenient time to discuss the law with Jesus. Perhaps he came under cover of darkness to keep his colleagues from knowing of his interest in Jesus. We cannot be certain of why he visited at night, but darkness and light are major themes in John's Gospel. Darkness represents that life that has set itself over against God. Light represents all that is related to God. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, and whatever his motive, he came in the midst of his own darkness. Only a rebirth by the grace of God in Christ could deliver him into the light.

To Be Born Again (3:3–4)

3:3. Jesus certainly shocked Nicodemus. Nicodemus believed God was King and that God ruled. He expected God to act at some point in history to rule uniquely in and through Israel, making Israel the favored nation among all nations. Even other nations would come to Israel so that they might learn how to worship Israel's God (Isaiah 2:1–4). Since Nicodemus believed in this way, he wondered how Jesus could say that in order to “see the kingdom of God” he must be “born from above.” Nothing at the moment pointed to the impending reality of the spectacular events Nicodemus might have expected at the coming of the kingdom. No warrior-messiah presented himself who could throw off the Roman rule and establish political freedom. Israel's enemies were not fleeing before a demonstrated force of God. No kingdom of God presented itself that he could see. Of course, Jesus was making a different point. The kingdom, the rule of God, had arrived in Jesus, and Nicodemus could not see that this was so.

3:4. Jesus' statement in verse 3 perplexed Nicodemus. A rebirth is not possible, for a person cannot go through that physical process again. It is notable that Nicodemus, a person experienced in teaching and using symbol, simile, and metaphor, did not catch more of Jesus' meaning here. Perhaps the radical change demanded by Jesus for those who enter the kingdom confused him. For how did he, a teacher of Israel, need to begin all over again?

Being “born again” or “born from above,” are both appropriate ways to translate the Greek text, which calls for a new beginning. None of the old loyalties and commitments work; none of the old religious authorities belong. All previous loyalties and authorities that occupied a structure of rule in his life were to be swept away. Nicodemus needed God's radical reorientation of his life to open his eyes and see that Jesus was the king for whom he waited.

Teaching the Teacher (3:5–6)

3:5. First, Nicodemus had to enter the kingdom by “water” and the “Spirit.” Interpreters have no difficulty in understanding the reference to “Spirit” because the rebirth obviously comes from the work of God and not from the work of the individual. However, understanding Jesus'

reference to water in this process evokes several interpretations. Some interpreters who attach saving significance to baptism see Jesus as referring to the saving capacity of the baptism rite. The “water” then would be the cleansing and forgiving act of God mediated through the church and the “Spirit” in bringing the person into relationship with God.

Another suggestion is that Jesus made reference to the baptism of John, in which Nicodemus and others like him refused to participate. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance applied to Jews in preparation for the coming king. In this interpretation, therefore, Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed a baptism of repentance to see the kingdom of God.

Still another suggestion is that the water refers to the natural birth process. So, of course, both a natural birth and a spiritual birth are necessary; one has to have physical life and the spiritual life that only God can give. This idea gains support from the text since Jesus' main theme in this part of his exchange was birth. Also, Nicodemus had just referred in verse 4 to the impossibility of entering the womb to be born again. Therefore, my view is that physical (“of water”) and spiritual (“of . . . Spirit”) birth are meant.

3:6. The last interpretation of what “water” meant is further supported from the text. While human birth is human in origin, birth through God's Spirit is divine in origin. Only God in Jesus through the Spirit can bring about this birth.

How the New Birth Happens (3:7–16)

3:7–8. Nicodemus should not have been surprised that the new birth is the work of God. The Spirit of God does what the Spirit of God wills to do. No one can determine the origin of the wind, no one can ultimately stop the force of the wind, and no one can determine the destiny of the wind. At the same time we need the wind in order to live. The wind has a sovereignty about it that human beings cannot capture. So it is with the Spirit of God. Christ and his work and teaching were God's act. Nicodemus could be drawn into it only by the mercy and grace of God, by the work of the Spirit of God, and by Nicodemus responding to the invitation of Jesus to be born again.

3:9–11. Nicodemus still did not grasp the life-changing thought of Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus met disbelief and misunderstanding

about his kingdom and his rule. Nicodemus becomes for us a picture of the kind of resistance to the new beginning for history that Jesus brought. Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel who could not see. Jesus told him the truth—personal “testimony” arising out of personal experience and knowledge, and Nicodemus did not see. Jesus used earthly examples and references to introduce Nicodemus to the truth. Again Nicodemus did not see, and if there were no insight at that level he certainly could not see if Jesus opened heaven itself to him (3:12). It is necessary if one is to be born again to believe in Jesus, who is the heavenly One who saves us right where we are as we are (3:14).

3:14–15. Jesus’ whole life was testimony. The ultimate testimony was the cross where he was “lifted up,” functioning in similar fashion to the serpent being lifted up by Moses in the wilderness (3:14; Numbers 21:8–9). Those bitten by serpents who looked upon the lifted serpent lived. Likewise, to really see Jesus ruling from the cross through the greatest act of love ever is to see the one who delivers. People who accept the great act of love and forgiveness of Jesus on the cross enter the kingdom of Jesus, a rule of “eternal life” (John 3:15).

3:16. Of course, what motivates God’s redemptive actions is that God loves. Everyone is invited to begin again in the love of God. This love is without boundaries, “For God so loved the world.” God’s love has no limits. He “gave his only Son.” Hence everyone has the opportunity to receive a new beginning in God, because this act is for “whoever believes in him.” God is all-inclusive in his invitation. The old kingdom such as the one in which Nicodemus proudly held membership perished, but the new kingdom does not perish. Anyone belonging to Jesus and his rule has “eternal life.”

Focusing on the Meaning

Like Nicodemus, we are in darkness if we do not accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Darkness refers to an existence in which one is separated from God. To be in the light is to belong to an existence with God where God gives life eternal, a quality as well as a quantity of life.

Like Nicodemus, if we belong to the darkness we need to be born again. This means that our loyalties are changed or reordered. Jesus is Lord or King of life now, and we belong to his kingdom if we have trusted in him. We have stepped from the old order of life into a new order of life. With Jesus as Lord, those loyalties and relationships that are contrary to his will belong to the old world and are left behind. All others are reordered under his Lordship. In other words, we are born again. Nicodemus could not take his old order and make it fit the new, and neither can we.

Like Nicodemus, God's love is for us. It is so wide, so high, and so deep that everyone has an open invitation to be saved from the old existence into the new, eternal existence in Jesus Christ.

All this is the beginning of our journey into eternity. We can begin this journey only at the same place Jesus invited Nicodemus to begin. As Acts 4:12 says about Jesus, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

TEACHING PLANS

Note: Some teachers may think, *Everyone in my class is a Christian. Why do I need to teach this lesson?* Consider at least two things: (1) This assumption may not be accurate, and thus the lesson provides an opportunity for class members to review and/or make a recommitment; (2) the lesson provides opportunity to reflect on the question, *What do I have to share with others from my faith experience?*

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Preparation
 - a. In advance of today's session ask a member to bring to class several travel aids, such as maps, a compass, a globe,

- travel brochures, and a passport. Display these items in a prominent place in the classroom.
- b. Write on a poster board or newsprint the words of Psalm 84:5 (NIV): “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.” Post this in a prominent place in the classroom. (Leave the poster up for the next session as well.)
2. After prayer, begin the class session by asking, *How do you prepare for a trip? Do you engage a travel agent? Do you plan the details yourself? Who in your family does the planning?* Allow for responses. You may comment that it is amazing how some people embark on trips without detailed planning. Adventurous spirits may prefer the serendipitous aspects of *non-planning!*
 3. Suggest that class members imagine themselves as travel guides. Then use the material in the unit introduction to describe two approaches to helping travelers (a travel agent or a travel guide). Ask: *What is the main difference between the two approaches?* Emphasize that the point is *personal experience* and that most people would rather follow a guide who has been there!
 4. Note that this unit is about the journey of spiritual growth. Point to the Scripture poster containing the words of Psalm 84:5. Point out that Scripture indicates the dynamic nature of the faith walk. It is a *walk, a journey*, not something static.
 5. Note that today’s lesson is about the beginning of the spiritual journey. Point out that the lesson provides an opportunity to review, affirm, and/or renew personal commitment to Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Guide Bible Study

6. Invite someone to read John 3:1–8, and ask class members to listen for answers to these three questions:
 - a. What is the metaphor or image Jesus used to describe what Nicodemus needed to do?
 - b. What was the objection of the man to whom Jesus spoke?

c. What was Jesus' answer to the man's objection?

Allow time for brief responses.

7. Encourage each person to turn to another member and brainstorm together paradoxes in Scripture. Offer as an example a camel going through a needle's eye (Matt. 19:24). Allow three to five minutes for this exercise, and then ask for examples, writing them on the board (it is not necessary to have Scripture citations). Add these if not mentioned: losing one's life in order to save it; unless you become as a little child; blessed are they who hunger and thirst.
8. Note that being born again is a difficult paradox to grasp for one who is not Christian. Point out Nicodemus's problem with focusing on the physical aspects of the metaphor. Use the information on John 3:3–8 in the *Study Guide* and on 3:4 in this *Teaching Guide* to explain the meaning of the phrase "born again" as *born from above*. Ask this reflective question: *How is it possible to born again?*

Encourage Application

9. Enlist someone to read John 13:34–35, and ask members to listen for the criterion for being called a disciple (loving one another).
10. Write John 3:16 (reference or words) on one side of the board and John 13:34–35 (reference or words) on the other. Leave a large gap between the two. Ask: *What is the earthly bridge between these two Scriptures?* Draw an arched line between the two Scriptures (like a bridge), and then write "YOU are the bridge" on the line.
11. Use question four from the *Study Guide* for discussion. Also consider using for discussion the "Engel Scale of Evangelism"² available in "Teaching Resource Items" at www.baptistwaypress.org. Suggest that this scale is a way of showing the different levels of interest people may have in becoming a Christian and the difference conversion is to make in one's life. Ask members to reflect on what the scale suggests to them, including where they are on that scale.
12. Lead members to reflect on their personal relationship with Jesus. Encourage members to make a commitment to Jesus if they have not done so. Then ask them to reflect on how much spiritual growth

has occurred since their initial commitment to Christ. Then ask members to consider what, from their spiritual journey, they have to share with someone who is not Christian.

13. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's grace, demonstrated in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Pray for courage in sharing our faith journeys with others.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Display several road maps, some opened. Begin the session by asking who in the class has taken a recent trip. Ask him or her to describe how he or she planned for the trip (what tools were used, what decisions had to be made).
2. Note that today's lesson is about a different kind of journey—the spiritual journey.
3. Using the *Study Guide* material under the heading “The Love of God,” provide a short introduction focusing on the love of God. (Consider focusing your remarks around the lead sentence in the third paragraph, “Jesus Christ calls his followers to the depths of faith in the midst of a shallow world.”) Share that at the end of the lesson today you will ask whether someone is willing to share a brief testimony of how God has changed his or her life since he or she began a relationship with Jesus, or how God has worked in his or her life recently.

Guide Bible Study

4. Lead members to turn to John 3:1–8 and read the passage silently, noting the conversation in which Jesus engaged. Invite someone to describe the conversation. Ask, *Why do you think Nicodemus misunderstood the point Jesus was making?* (One reason is that he was focusing on the physical aspects of the metaphor or image.)

5. Engage class members in a consideration of the meaning of the phrase “born again.” Ask, *When did you first hear the phrase? What does it really mean?* Use the information on John 3:3–8 in the *Study Guide* and on 3:4 in this *Teaching Guide* to explain the meaning of the phrase “born again” as *born from above*, referring to a spiritual rebirth.
6. Ask members to listen for Nicodemus’s question in verse 9 and the response in verses 10–16 as you read John 3:9–16.
7. Ask, *Why is it so difficult for some to grasp the idea of a spiritual rebirth?*
8. Share this story: A friend shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with a man who wanted to believe but was convinced he could not become a Christian until he stopped smoking. Ask, *What other obstacles do people let stand between them and a relationship with Jesus?* (Pride, things, ambition, selfishness, unwillingness to accept God’s grace.) Lead members in saying John 3:16 together.

Encourage Application

9. Use questions 4 and 5 in the *Study Guide*.
10. Invite a volunteer (or several) to share a testimony of how God has changed his or her life since he or she began a relationship with Jesus, or how God has worked in his or her life recently. Use question 1 in the *Study Guide* if encouragement for sharing is needed.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–9 are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.
2. The Engle scale was developed by evangelism advocate James Engle as one way to think about the process of making a decision for Christ. It is available in various forms from various sources, including *What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest: A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975) by James F. Engel and Wilbert Norton. See also www.angelfire.com/bc/normanhousechurch/EngleScale.htm.