

April 9
Lesson 6

SAVING LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Titus 3:1-7

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-21

JOHN 3:1-16

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

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ 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.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

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

¹⁶ 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.

KEY VERSE

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.—John 3:16

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recite [John 3:16](#) from memory.
2. Explain why Nicodemus had difficulty comprehending what Jesus said.
3. Write a prayer of commitment to love the world in the sense of [John 3:16](#) while avoiding love for the world in the sense of [1 John 2:15](#).

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A Mystery and a Love Story
- B. Lesson Background

I. Nicodemus Meets Jesus (John 3:1-3)

- A. Encounter at Night (vv. 1, 2)
Nighttime Adventures
- B. Truth About Rebirth (v. 3)

II. Nicodemus Engages Jesus (John 3:4-8)

- A. Birth, Age, Womb (v. 4)
- B. Water, Wind, Spirit (vv. 5-8)
The Uncontrollable Wind

III. Jesus Critiques Nicodemus (John 3:9-16)

- A. Contrast (vv. 9-13)
- B. Comparison (vv. 14, 15)
- C. Compassion (v. 16)

Conclusion

- A. The Mystery of God's Love
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. A Mystery and a Love Story

One popular story type is the mystery. A foul deed is committed, clues are gathered, suspects are interviewed, and finally the perpetrator is revealed. Some readers prefer love stories. Two people meet, discover an unlikely attraction, and eventually overcome differences to form a lasting bond of love.

Today's lesson reflects on the good news of Jesus in a way that combines the mystery with the love story. The mystery is about how God acted to make his world right—a mystery revealed. The love story is about why God acted in such a self-sacrificial way on behalf of rebellious humans.

B. Lesson Background

Our text comes from one of the most beloved books in the Bible, the Gospel of John. In providing narratives of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it is rather different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those three (known as *the synoptic Gospels*) are notable for their similarities. John's Gospel, written later, assumes the reader knows the main points of the storyline found in the other Gospels as it provides different, additional material.

John likes to narrate Jesus' private, one-on-one conversations, including those he had with religious teachers. Today's text also belongs in this category: Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people.

The Pharisees were a leading party of Jewish thought and practice in the New Testament period. They advocated careful adherence to the Law of Moses and to the traditions they had developed about the law. Their aim was to build a fence around the law. That is, they taught that if people followed their traditions (and thereby stayed outside the fence), then they wouldn't even come close to breaking God's law.

Though the Pharisees promoted a difficult form of Jewish observance, they were quite popular in Jesus' time and beyond. Their strictness was a channel for the zeal many felt for the God of Israel.

I. Nicodemus Meets Jesus

(John 3:1-3)

A. Encounter at Night (vv. 1, 2)

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

John introduces an individual with whom Jesus will have a most significant conversation. As a *Pharisee*, Nicodemus takes a strict view of the boundaries of God's people (see the Lesson Background). The fact that he is a *member of the Jewish ruling council* means that he is part of the Sanhedrin. This council had come into being in the centuries between the Old and New Testaments. The high priest, who presides over the temple, appoints the 70 members of this council to assist him.

^{2a} He came to Jesus at night

To come *to Jesus at night* is to come in secret. Is Nicodemus afraid to be seen with the controversial Jesus? Later John will contrast light and darkness as symbols of good and evil ([John 3:19-21](#)). Where does Nicodemus stand presently?

NIGHTTIME ADVENTURES

When I was in college, my younger sister decided it was time for me to learn to drive a car with a manual transmission (a “stick shift,” if you remember those!). She made this decision at 2:00 a.m. I was home on spring break, so there was no time like the present.

We crept outside and pushed the car down the driveway so the sound of the engine starting would not awaken our mother. We jumped in the car at the proper moment, then spent the next hour driving the back roads nearby. We laughed at my mistakes and had fun together, and I learned how to drive a stick shift that night. Our sneakiness aside, nighttime provided an ideal opportunity to learn before putting my new skill into practice in the heavier traffic of daylight hours.

HOW TO SAY IT

Nicodemus *Nick-uh-dee-mus.*

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez.*

rabbi *rab-eye.*

Sanhedrin *San-huh-drun or San-heed-run.*

synoptic *suh-nawp-tik.*

Something similar seems to have happened with Nicodemus. Perhaps he came to Jesus at night so fellow council members wouldn’t see them together. Whether or not that was the motive, it was an ideal time to learn, with no press of crowds to distract. Whatever he learned in private he could mull over later without being asked to take an immediate *agree* or *disagree* position.

Disciples who had accompanied Jesus openly for three years went into hiding after his death ([John 20:19](#)). But two other men, members of the council ([Mark 15:43](#)), did the opposite; Nicodemus was one of those two ([John 19:38-42](#)). People absorb information in different ways. We must give them a chance to do so.—L. M. W.

^{2b} and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Nicodemus speaks highly of Jesus, since *Rabbi* is a title of great respect (compare [John 1:38](#)). Nicodemus affirms that Jesus’ miraculous signs demonstrate decisively that God is with him. Jesus’ miracles are polarizing; they cause some to believe in his divine identity ([John 2:11, 23; 7:31; 9:16b](#)) while not being persuasive to others ([9:16a; 11:47; 12:37](#)). The only right response to these signs is faith in Jesus as the Son of God sent to give life ([John 20:30, 31](#)).

What Do You Think?

How should we respond when people speak well of Jesus but don’t acknowledge his full authority?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what we say and don’t say

Regarding what we do and don’t do

B. Truth About Rebirth (v. 3)

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Jesus’ response takes the form of a blunt and authoritative statement of what is required to *see the kingdom of God*—and Nicodemus hasn’t even asked a question yet! At least, one is not recorded.

The succinct phrase *the kingdom of God* serves as a summary of the promises God gave to Israel about his making the world right again. Truth, justice, mercy, life—these are the blessings of God’s kingdom, the ultimate fulfillment of his loving purpose for humanity.

As a religious teacher, Nicodemus understands that when God establishes his kingdom, his people will experience its blessings. Nicodemus further understands that belonging to God’s people means being a faithful Jew, one who was born into the nation and who honors the Law of Moses.

But Jesus challenges all that. Birth into the 12 tribes of Israel does not confer automatic membership in the kingdom of God. To be a subject

of this kingdom requires birth of a different kind.

In relaying Jesus' response, the Gospel writer uses a word in the Greek language that has two possible meanings for the context at hand: "again" and "from above." (Most Bibles have a footnote on this.) Which does Jesus mean? If "again," he means an experience separate from and after physical birth. If "from above," he means an action that God performs. Because both suit the context well, we may see a play on words here, as Jesus implies both meanings.



Visual for Lesson 6. Point to this visual as you add this question to class discussion of [John 3:16](#): "What are some ways to think globally as we act locally?"

II. Nicodemus Engages Jesus

([JOHN 3:4-8](#))

A. Birth, Age, Womb ([v. 4](#))

4. "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus' answer perplexes Nicodemus. Understanding "born again" in a physical sense, his questions serve to protest that a second such birth is impossible. As long as Nicodemus holds to his concept of what is required to be in God's kingdom, he will fail to understand Jesus.

B. Water, Wind, Spirit ([vv. 5-8](#))

5. Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Jesus continues to challenge the conventional understanding of membership in God's people. Like the previous challenge, this one compares entry into *the kingdom of God* with birth. This birth is *of water and the Spirit*. In the Greek text of John's Gospel, this phrase is constructed to show that the two items belong together, forming one idea. So *water* is not one kind of birth and *Spirit* another, but the two comprise a single event.

Interpretations vary, and one popular proposal is that *water* refers to baptism. This is natural to think, since the New Testament associates water baptism, in the context of faith in Christ, with becoming part of God's people and receiving the Spirit ([Acts 2:38](#); [22:16](#); [Romans 6:1-6](#); [1 Corinthians 12:13](#); [Galatians 3:27](#); [Colossians 2:11-14](#); [Titus 3:5](#); [1 Peter 3:21](#)). But if Christian baptism is what is meant, then [John 3:10](#) (below) would have Jesus criticizing Nicodemus for not understanding something that will not come into being until the Day of Pentecost!

Jesus' point seems to be broader, with a good possibility that he is drawing on the Old Testament's depictions of water and Spirit in relation to each other. In that regard, most important for the case at hand is [Ezekiel 36:25-27](#). There "water" indicates cleansing from impurity, while "new spirit" and "my spirit" point to transformed hearts.

The previous chapter gives us a brief glimpse at the connection between water and ceremonial purification in first-century Judaism ([John 2:6, 7](#)). Taken in tandem with *the Spirit*, the reference is to cleansing performed by God. Therefore Nicodemus can *enter the kingdom of God* only if God cleanses him of what he cannot cleanse himself: the guilt of his sin. This is the very thing that Christian baptism will depict when it is instituted a few years after this conversation. So these two interpretations are not far apart.

6. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

Jesus emphasizes that God alone can accomplish the transformation. *Spirit* contrasts with *flesh* as the immortal God contrasts with mortal humanity. To receive God's blessing requires his action. Any status Nicodemus holds means nothing.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to trust less in our own capabilities and more in the Holy Spirit's?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

As we respond to blessings ([Job 1:1-5](#); etc.)

As we respond to hardships ([Job 1:21](#); etc.)

7. "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

Repeating the thought of [verse 3](#), the translation "again" can be "from above," with Jesus perhaps intending both. Either way, Jesus reaffirms that God's action is what gives a person the blessings of his kingdom.

8. "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."

Continuing to challenge Nicodemus's lack of understanding, Jesus makes a comparison between God's *Spirit* and *the wind*. That comparison is especially pointed because in Greek the same word can mean either *wind* or *Spirit*. Wind, Jesus says, blows as it wants, without influence of humans and without their understanding. God's Spirit is the same: the Holy Spirit does his work regardless of the approval or disapproval of religious leaders like Nicodemus.

That man's familiarity with Israel's Scriptures should help Nicodemus understand this point. God's actions often defy human expectation. He called aged, childless Abraham to be the father of a great nation. He called enslaved Israel to overcome mighty Egypt. He worked through unlikely prophets and kings against the most powerful human empires. Now in Jesus, God is doing the same.

THE UNCONTROLLABLE WIND

Wind is a constant in Nebraska. No matter the season or the weather, the wind blows. Author Willa Cather described grassland under its influence: "There was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running."

Wind becomes dangerous during thunderstorms. Every year we hear of tornadoes destroying homes and even entire towns in our part of the country. I grew up in Indiana, so I was no stranger to tornado drills in school. At the signal, we would all hurry to the safest spot, crouch down, and wait for the "all clear" signal.

In time, however, I began to disregard the danger, since so many of the alarms proved false. But longtime Nebraska residents, many having had firsthand experience with damaging winds, take the warnings seriously.

Those who have experienced tornadic fury personally know all too well how true it is that "the wind blows wherever it pleases." We have no control over its course or its power. So it is with God's Spirit. We cannot control him. We cannot dictate our plans to him. Our response, rather, is that of respect and submission.—L. M. W.

III. Jesus Critiques Nicodemus

([JOHN 3:9-16](#))

A. Contrast (vv. 9-13)

9. “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

Nicodemus remains perplexed. Jesus’ words have defied the core of what Nicodemus believes about his relationship with God.

10. “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”

Jesus’ reply now turns from the general to the personal. Nicodemus is a recognized authority, with the word translated *teacher* the same as the one also translated “teacher” in [John 3:2](#). He believes that his position within God’s people is secure. Yet he fails to understand Jesus’ teaching.

If Nicodemus takes these words to heart, he will begin to discount his high position and surrender his cherished ideas (compare [Philippians 3:4-11](#)). Otherwise, he will have to deny Jesus’ mighty deeds ([John 3:2](#)) and compelling teaching.

What Do You Think?

What should we contemplate before presuming to become teachers of the Bible?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what is to be taught ([Titus 2:1-6](#), [9](#), [10](#); [Hebrews 5:11-6:3](#); etc.)

Regarding personal responsibility ([Titus 2:7](#), [8](#); [James 3:1](#); etc.)

Regarding one’s own teachability ([Romans 2:21](#); [Titus 2:12](#); etc.)

Regarding spiritual giftedness and ability ([Romans 12:7](#); [2 Timothy 2:24](#); etc.)

Other

11. “Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.”

A person can give *testimony* (not just opinion) about what the person knows as a witness. Jesus affirms that he and others are in such a position. Given that Nicodemus has already acknowledged the godly origin of Jesus’ teaching and miracles ([John 3:2](#)), will he be inconsistent in daring to reject such witnesses?

12, 13. “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.”

Jesus knows *of heavenly things* because he is *from heaven* (compare [John 8:23](#)). But Nicodemus has had no such experience. So in speaking with him, Jesus has been using language and comparisons that are accessible to that man, given his earthbound experiences: birth, water, and wind.

Yet Nicodemus does not understand. So Jesus calls on another Old Testament connection in referring to himself as *the Son of Man*. In [Daniel 7:13, 14](#), “one like a son of man” receives authority from God to rule the earth, defeating the beastly empires. Jesus claims that role. He asserts that because God has authorized him and sent him down from heaven, he speaks with unique knowledge and authority. The fulfillment of all God’s promises is tied to Jesus (compare [Proverbs 30:4](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can we better show our need for the knowledge and help of one “from heaven”?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Before undertaking a project or ministry

During a difficult situation

After failing at something

B. Comparison (vv. 14, 15)

14. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,”

Jesus makes another connection with Israel’s Scriptures. When God sent “venomous snakes” among the unfaithful Israelites *in the wilderness*, he instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Those who looked at *the snake* lived, their action being one of faith in God’s mercy ([Numbers 21:4-9](#)). Jesus, *the Son of Man*, will also *be lifted up*, but on a cross ([John 8:28](#); [12:32-34](#)). Unlike the bronze snake, Jesus is worthy of worship (compare [2 Kings 18:4](#)).

15. “that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Like Moses' lifting of the bronze snake for the stricken Israelites, Jesus' crucifixion will mean life. This will be life that is no longer plagued by the ancient serpent, the deceiver of humanity ([Genesis 3:1-15](#)). Daniel's triumphant "son of man" defeats the kingdoms of evil and establishes the reign of God (again, [Daniel 7:13, 14](#)).

We wonder how Nicodemus reacts to Jesus' declarations. The text does not say, but Jesus' words must seem to be an unsolvable riddle. The earth-shattering events of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension will be needed to make the meaning plain. For now, Nicodemus is challenged to set aside his own claim to authority and listen submissively to the one from Heaven.

C. Compassion (v. 16)

¹⁶ 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.

Jesus' discourse reaches its climax in what is probably the most famous verse of the New Testament. Having challenged Nicodemus with a new way of understanding God's plan, Jesus now focuses on the self-giving love of God for all humanity. Such love transcends the kind that focuses on the attractiveness of the object or on one's connection to the object. This is more than the love of friendship, family, or romance. God loves humanity despite its unloveliness, failure, and open rebellion. *The world* that God loves is the world that refuses to listen to him ([John 1:10, 11](#)). For God's love to be effective, he must take the initiative—and he does.

God reaches out by sending *his one and only Son*. God had challenged Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his unique son of promise ([Genesis 22:2](#)), and by faith Abraham had declared that God would provide the sacrifice ([22:8](#)). Now God provides that sacrifice to the world.

This gift, like all God's gifts, must be received by faith ([Acts 10:43](#); [1 Corinthians 12:9](#); [Ephesians 2:8](#); etc.). To believe in the one whom God sends is to affirm (1) that God has truly sent him, (2) that God truly saves through him, and (3) that one trusts persistently in what God has done through him. The promised blessing has two sides: escaping the eternal death we deserve and gaining the *eternal life* we do not deserve. Eternal life is life in the era of God's fulfilled promise. It is life restored to his ideal. It is life characterized by faith in the self-giving God. It is life in which believers in Jesus reflect God's self-giving love in their own self-giving service for one another ([John 13:12-17, 34, 35](#)).

What Do You Think?

What steps can our church take to express God's saving love to our community?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of evaluating ministry resources

In terms of evaluating need

In terms of prayer

Other

Conclusion

A. The Mystery of God's Love

For Nicodemus, the story of God's love was a mystery for two reasons: it challenged his view of his own importance, and it was still unfolding before his eyes. For us the story may be a mystery as well. Though we might not think ourselves important, we still hold stubbornly to our independence. Though we know the story's climax, it may be so familiar to us that we find it commonplace.

Perhaps we need to reclaim the mysterious wonder of the Bible's storyline as it is summarized in today's text. The God who created us has acted time and again to undo the guilt and power of sin. Jesus predicted that such efforts would reach their climax in himself as the one who went on to be lifted up on the cross. The one and only Son of God surrendered to death so that undeserving humans would not have to.

You and I are those undeserving humans, the ones whom God so loved that he gave Jesus over to death ([Romans 3:23-26](#)). By his resurrection he claimed authority that belongs to God alone. By his authority alone can people enter God's promised kingdom, the full realization of his gracious love.

B. Prayer

God of unfathomable love, we thank you for your unspeakable gift in Christ! We commit ourselves again to trust in him and him alone, now and forever. We pray this in his name. Amen!

C. Thought to Remember

Only Christianity has a [John 3:16](#).

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

As learners arrive, give each a piece of paper. Say, “Imagine being 10 years old and you have been asked, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ Write down that occupation, but do not show it to anyone.”

After all students have arrived and written their responses to the question, ask a volunteer to state, in any order, three occupations including the one on his or her paper. The class should try to guess the job written on that volunteer’s paper. Continue this game with as many other volunteers as time and interest allows.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Here to Help” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “There are many praiseworthy occupations. Many of us have chosen a job because we have a desire to help others and to make the world a better place. But as much as every job is necessary in some way, only one person came to do more than help. He came to save! Let’s look at a very well-known passage of Scripture today.”

Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups. Each group is to create a brief skit in which a Christian is responding to a non-Christian friend’s idea about what will save the world. The ideas from the non-Christian and a relevant Scripture make up the assignments. Our suggested responses follow.

Group 1—The world doesn’t need Jesus. We need education. When people know how the world works, everything will be better.

Respond with ideas from [John 3:1-3](#) (focusing on [v. 3](#)).

We need more than learning what is right and wrong. We need a brand-new, born-again nature that will enable us to do right and not wrong.

Group 2—The world doesn’t need Jesus. We need great social programs. When people have plenty of food and adequate health care, everything will be better.

Respond with ideas from [John 3:4-9](#) (focusing on [v. 6](#)).

While it is great to make people healthy—even healthy people will eventually die. We need spiritual rebirth, not just physical maintenance.

Group 3—The world doesn’t need Jesus. We need the wisest politicians possible. When the world is directed by truly learned people, everything will be better.

Respond with ideas from [John 3:10-16](#) (focusing on [vv. 11, 13](#)).

Wise political leaders only know what they have experienced or studied about the world. We need authoritative answers from the Creator of the world.

Allow time for groups to perform their skits.

Into Life

Say, “[John 3:16](#) is such a familiar verse that we may fail to consider how deeply profound it is.”

Prepare to close the class by having a student read or recite [John 3:16](#). Then look at that student and say, “So what!” You will probably get a shocked reaction, but continue to press, asking the class how those words should change our lives.

A few points that may emerge are: God loves the world, not just one nation, culture, or interest group. While God would have been justified giving people a death sentence, he sacrificed to give us life. Being saved means one no longer has to fear death. God made it possible to live for eternity, not just for this moment.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Applying [John 3:16](#)” activity from the reproducible page. Use it as a way to challenge learners to think of the tremendous change this precious statement can make in the lives of others.