

LifeGroup Notes - Participant's Guide

John 3:1-21

One of the tensions that John (the gospel writer) takes time to underscore is that nobody really understood Jesus (including his disciples). When Jesus said the temple would be raised again his audience completely missed Jesus' resurrection prediction. Even when people *did* believe in Jesus, he didn't believe in them because he knew all people. Jesus knew that many had come to wrong assumptions and conclusions about him. In today's text we will see the same theme repeated. Nicodemus is a very learned, devoted and religious man, yet he too will totally misunderstand Jesus. The story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night reminds us that we all have opinions about Jesus that are off target. We think we get Jesus when we really don't. The only hope we have for illumination is to believe Jesus himself concerning who is and what he'd come to earth to achieve.

Prayer

Pray for each other and for a spirit of openness to deeper insights from God's word.

Warming Up

1. Choose one or two of the following:
 - a. Are you a night owl or early riser?
 - b. Who was the biggest influence on your life growing up and why?
 - c. Did you have a godfather or godmother in your life?
 - d. Talk about someone in your life who seems to know everything about the Bible.

Context

Read John 3:1-2.

In today's vernacular the title Pharisee is not a complement. If you're not sure, try calling someone you know well a "Pharisee" and see how they respond! Here's some background to help us understand Nicodemus.

By Jesus' day, Pharisees were one of the leading groups. Pharisees were scholars who tried hard to obey the laws in the Old Testament and a dizzying array of man-made laws which they added to the Old Testament. The Jews respected them and gave them great social, religious and political influence. Pharisees usually took great pride in their positions. Nicodemus (in this passage) is also called a "Ruler of the Jews." That means he was also one of the elite 70 members of the

*Sanhedrin, the political / religious body that ruled Israel. The Sanhedrin ruled under the supervision of Herod, who reported directly to the Roman emperor.*¹

2. Does any of this shed new light on who Nicodemus was?

Read John 3:3-10 and Matthew 18:2-4.

*Since a proselyte [a new convert into the Jewish faith] to Judaism was sometimes spoken of as a child newly born, Nicodemus may have thought it inappropriate that such a term be used of a leader like himself.*² Nicodemus was a learned and deeply devout man, he was no dummy! Essentially Jesus highlights that all of his religious/spiritual experience had not led him any closer to life with God. To be “born again” into new (eternal) life with Jesus Nicodemus needed to become like a newbie; he needed to humble himself and look to God with trust like a child to a parent.

3. How might we see Nicodemus’ challenge play itself out in our society today?
4. What obstacles have you faced, or are you currently facing, in order to believe in Jesus?

Read John 3:2, 7:50-52 and 19:38-40.

Scholars have tried to calculate how costly the ointments and oils were, by modern standards, that Nicodemus used when burying Jesus. Their conclusion? Anywhere from 50,000 USD to 500,000 USD. Either way: Nicodemus spent much to honour and bury Jesus.³

5. Why do you think John is eager to note that Nicodemus makes more appearances in Jesus’ life? What light do these verses shed on who Nicodemus’ story ends? Do you think Jesus’ message to Nicodemus in John 3 made a difference?
6. **Next Level:** Take two minutes as a group to pause and pray. Grab a piece of paper or your phone and write down specific names of people that are brought to mind. Is there someone you know that the the Holy Spirit is wanting to transform with the good news of Jesus? Someone you had written off? Be sure to write these names down specifically and pray for these people at the end of the evening.

Reread John 3:5 and Ezekiel 36:24-29.

Many people have wrestled with the phrase “born of water and Spirit.” Does this mean that one must be baptized to be born again? It’s important to remember that Jesus likely had Ezekiel’s prophecy in mind. Don Carson writes: *God is promising through the prophet Ezekiel, six centuries before Jesus, that a time is coming when there will be a transformative new beginning, characterized by spectacular cleansing symbolized by water that washes away all impurities and idols, and by the powerful gift of the Spirit that transforms the hearts of people. That is what is required if people are to see and enter the kingdom of God.* This means that the water is symbolic; that when we are “born again” through belief in Jesus, God washes away all our sin and resurrects us to new life just like the stone heart becomes a real heart in Ezekiel!

¹ Adam Dixon, *Gospel of John - Nobody Understands Jesus*, (cru.com), pg. 10

² Leon Morris *Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (1989), 150.

³ Described in the sermon, “Enneagram #5 The Observer” from Sandals Church: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qErM5sLv2IE>.

7. God's Word is often rich with imagery, but sometimes that gets confusing.
 - a. Take some time reflecting upon all the images we've talked about in this study: new birth, stone hearts, clean water, and resurrection. What still confuses you? How do these images clarify or obscure your understanding of Christianity?
 - b. What image can you most identify with to help you picture the work God wants to do in your heart and life?
8. The message is that without Christ we have sin sick, cold, stone hearts. How is this a countercultural message in 2020?

Application

9. In John 3:2 we're told that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus was ashamed because he had not yet come to believe in Jesus. Those who like Jesus only, but don't yet follow him, will be ashamed of him when the road gets difficult.
 - a. Are there ways in which we have Nicodemus tendencies, meaning: we try to relate to Jesus under the safety of dark?
 - b. Are you ever ashamed to be seen living for, knowing, and following Jesus in your families, social circles, schools, workplaces?
 - c. Jesus still allows Nicodemus to have a conversation with him in the safety of the dark. What does this say about Jesus posture toward not-yet-believers? How might this encourage you on your own faith journey or in your ministry to non-Christians?

Read Acts 4:13.

10. Some of us can relate to Nicodemus' scholarly and skeptic tendencies. But many of us cannot. For Nicodemus the call was to become like a newbie or a child, to trust God simply and not overthink. But for others (like Peter and John) God is encouraging us to step forward with the wisdom and insight only God's Spirit can provide.
 - a. Have you ever felt like you're too ordinary or uneducated to be used by God?
 - b. Who do you identify with more: Nicodemus (John 3) or Peter/John (Acts 4)? Why?

Prayer

Spend some time praying for each other, keeping in mind the Nicodemus or Peter/John tendencies that have just been discussed:

- Pray for the "Nicodemuses" to trust God like a child, to move from their head to their heart.
- Pray for the "Peters and Johns" to believe God can work through them to boldly engage their communities with the good news.

- Pray for boldness to represent Jesus well in the daylight, to not be ashamed of him in all the spheres of our lives.
- Pray for the integrity to represent Jesus in the hidden areas of our lives.

Next Level: Spend some specific time praying for the names written down by your group members earlier this evening. Pray for the Holy Spirit to open their eyes to the good news of Jesus (Acts 26:18).