



Part 1 of the Ignite Series

Nicodemus

John 3:1-21

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 3:1-21

Goal

The goal for this chapter is to help your group be open to the spiritual life.

A Messiah Context

Throughout history, the Jewish people were acutely aware of the need to fix the problem of sin that had begun in the Garden of Eden. They waited for the day when God would make everything right and fix the chaos in humankind and in nature. In particular, they were waiting for a messiah. Messiah in Hebrew means “anointed one” and refers to the anointing of a king. They envisioned a day when God would send a new messiah, or king, who would resolve the tragedy of sin that started with Adam and Eve.

The Messiah and the Pharisees (John 3:1 - 2)

The Gospel of John tells us that Nicodemus was a “man of the Pharisees” (Jn 3:1). The Pharisees were a prominent group of teachers in Jesus’ time. They believed the messiah could come at any moment,

an event they eagerly awaited as they attempted to live out the Jewish law to the fullest.

In the Gospels, Jesus slowly reveals Himself to be this messiah to the Jewish people — but some Jews, including the Pharisees, have a hard time accepting Jesus' kingship and question His teachings. One of the promises of the messiah was that he would perform signs or miracles (Isa 35:5 – 6). Just before this passage, Jesus teaches in the Jewish temple. The teachers there question Him by asking, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" (Jn 2:18). Then, in John 2:23 – 25, Jesus performs many signs, and some of the Jews believe in Him.

In the dark, Nicodemus enters the conversation with Jesus as a Pharisee who believed in the signs that Jesus performed. We are told that Nicodemus comes by night and calls Jesus a "man of God" (Jn 3:2). He courageously tries to investigate who Jesus is because of the signs that Jesus performed (Jn 3:2; 2:23).

And yet, their conversation reveals more about Nicodemus' character than Jesus'. Nicodemus is interested in what Jesus has to say but remains skeptical. At the heart of their conversation, Jesus and Nicodemus discuss the kingdom of God for which the Pharisees were longing. Specifically, Jesus (as king) tells Nicodemus how to enter this kingdom: by being born again through water and Spirit (a reference to baptism).

Born Again

But Nicodemus fails to understand what Jesus is saying. Rather than accepting the teaching and trying to understand, Nicodemus challenges the validity of the teaching: "How can a man be born when he is old?" (Jn 3:4). He has seen the signs that Jesus has done, and yet

he still will not put his full trust into what Jesus is saying. Jesus points out the key problem: Nicodemus fails to get beyond the flesh or the natural world to see the work of the Spirit (Jn 3:6). Because of this, Nicodemus cannot understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to listen to the testimony that he has heard (Jesus' reference to "our testimony" in John 3:11 refers to the testimony of Jesus, including the signs he performed, and John the Baptist).

For God So Loved the World

Jesus makes a bold claim to establish credibility and authority with Nicodemus: He has descended from heaven and will then be lifted up. Jesus refers to a story about Moses. During the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the people were bitten by serpents. For them to be healed and for their lives to be saved, Moses erected a golden serpent for the people. Whoever looked upon the serpent would be healed (Num 21). Jesus takes this analogy and uses it to illustrate the reason He is here on Earth: He will be lifted up (on the cross), and whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.

Jesus then utters one of the most famous verses in the Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." It has become famous because of how it succinctly states the reason why the Father sent Jesus into the world: not to condemn it, but to save it. "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). This is the revolutionary point for our culture. There are people who associate Christianity with a condemnation to hell. Here, Jesus notes that this is not His intention at all. He has come not to condemn, but to save.

Why Does the World Reject Jesus?

So, if Jesus came to save, why does the world reject Him? Jesus gives a direct answer: The world loves the darkness instead of the light (Jn 3:19). They mistakenly prefer condemnation to salvation. They are unwilling to have their lives and works exposed in the light, and so they stay in the darkness (Jn 3:20). In a subtle way, Jesus is also speaking of Nicodemus' actions in the darkness. Nicodemus must not be afraid to let them be exposed.

At the end of the passage, Jesus connects with the theme of sin and brokenness. Many people are given the opportunity to leave their brokenness behind, and yet a part of them still ironically clings to this brokenness. Jesus comes not just to give us a free pass but the opportunity to transform our lives from division and strife to wholeness and peace, if we are willing to do so. But we have to make the decision to cross this line. We have to overcome our attachment to the darkness.

Final Analysis

In some ways, the people in your study could be very much like Nicodemus. They may have heard of Jesus and accepted the invitation to hear more about Him. They may know the miracles He performed and how He rose from the dead, but they remain skeptical. Hopefully, through the questions of Nicodemus, they can courageously explore who Jesus is and why He came to Earth. Through an exploration of the message of Jesus and His death and resurrection on the cross, they can come to trust Jesus fully, just as Nicodemus did at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:39).

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 3:1-21

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever spent an extraordinary amount of time trying to figure out an answer to something? Perhaps you watched a TV show marathon to see what happens in the end. Or maybe you Googled a topic and wouldn't rest until you found exactly what you were looking for.

STEP 2: BACKGROUND

Today we are going to read about Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, and see how his story applies to our lives.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 3:1 – 21 together.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. From verses 1 – 2, what do we know about Nicodemus?

Answer: We know that Nicodemus is a man of the Pharisees, that he comes to Jesus at night and that he believes Jesus is a man of God because of the signs He performs.

2. Why do you think that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night?

Allow the group to discuss. One answer might be that he was afraid of what others would think about him coming to Jesus.

3. In the previous chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus performs signs for the people. That is part of the reason why Nicodemus is approaching Jesus. What role do signs play in faith?

Allow the group to discuss. Miracles can help us believe in God, and Jesus used miracles to confirm His identity. However, becoming too enamored with miracles can provide the wrong foundation for our faith or make us more interested in Jesus saving us materially (in finances, health, hunger, etc.) rather than saving us from sin. See CCC 547 – 550 for more on the role of signs.

4. What are Jesus and Nicodemus discussing?

Answer: If Jesus is the messiah-king, then He will have a kingdom. Jesus is telling Nicodemus how to enter this kingdom. Jesus tells him that he has to be born again through water and Spirit. This is a reference to baptism.

5. What is Nicodemus' reaction? Do you think it is understandable? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss. Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is talking about and questions how "being born again" can be possible.

6. What does Jesus think about Nicodemus' reaction? Why do you think Jesus feels this way?

Answer: Jesus thinks Nicodemus, as a teacher of the law, should have a better understanding of these things. Jesus notes the signs and testimony that Nicodemus has seen. These should have helped Nicodemus see more clearly.

7. Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus see beyond the material world to the spiritual. Do you ever think about what is beyond the material world? Explain.

Allow the group to discuss.

8. John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. You can even find it written on signs at sporting events. Why do you think this verse is quoted so often?

Allow the group to discuss. An example might be the verse sums up why Jesus came into this world.

9. Oftentimes, Christianity is portrayed as being judgmental or condemning. How do these verses challenge that notion?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. If Christianity is so good, why is it often rejected? What reason does Jesus give for why people do not accept Him?

Allow the group do discuss. The people wish to choose the darkness instead of the light. They do not want their evil deeds revealed.

11. What does this say about a person's role in accepting Jesus Christ and Christianity?

Answer: Our belief in Jesus involves changing who we are and how we act.

