

December 7, 2025 (Lesson 1)

JESUS LIFTED UP

1. **The Holy Spirit Births Spiritual Life** (John 3:1-8)
2. **Christ Lifted Up Foreshadowed** (John 3:9-15)
3. **Accept Salvation; Enter the Light** (John 3:16-21)

Central Truth: Christ's sacrificial death on the cross secured our eternal salvation.

Focus: Acknowledge God values humans and appreciate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our salvation.

Evangelism Emphasis: Christ offers new birth through the Holy Spirit.

Golden Text: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (John 3:14).

This new unit of lessons brings us into the wonderful world of the fourth Gospel. Written by the beloved disciple John, this account of the life of Jesus Christ is of a different character and style than the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The fourth Gospel was written to lead people to believe Jesus is the Son of God.

Instead of giving a birth narrative, John began his record of Christ's ministry with the eternal glory of the Trinity. Jesus is the divine Word of God made flesh. John recorded the demonstration of Christ's power in seven key signs (miracles). His teachings revolve around the disclosure of His divine identity as the "bread of life" (6:35); "the light of the world" (8:12); "the door of the sheep" (10:7); "the good shepherd" (10:11); "the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6); and "the true vine" (15:1).

The record of the call of John, the fisherman disciple from Galilee, is in Mark 1:19-20. Jesus called John and his brother James while they were mending nets with their father near the Sea of Galilee. John wrote three letters to churches (1, 2, and 3 John) and penned the final book of the New Testament, Revelation.

All of John's works are thought to have been written toward the end of the first century. The Gospel of John was probably written in the decade of the 80s from Ephesus.

Our study of the fourth Gospel will cover major themes dealing with our Lord Jesus Christ. This lesson is a study of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. “You must be born again” is the central message of this lesson. Unless we are born of the Spirit of God, we cannot inherit eternal life. Christian life does not begin with human effort or will; Christian life begins with God’s provision of saving grace.

1. THE HOLY SPIRIT BIRTHS SPIRITUAL LIFE

A. A Pharisee’s Search (John 3:1-4)

¹ There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: ² The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. ³ Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ⁴ Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?

John 3 presents a nighttime encounter between a Jewish religious leader and Jesus, the Son of God. It shows the great gap between man’s power to perceive and God’s revelation of truth. It shows that unless God helps us, we are lost in our veiled minds (2 Cor. 4:3-6).

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He was rebuked by the Pharisees for his supportive attitude toward Jesus (John 7:50-52). He joined Joseph of Arimathea in providing the crucified Jesus a proper burial (19:39).

The Pharisees were one of the two major Jewish religious groups at the time of Christ. (The Sadducees were the other.) Pharisees were a lay organization with about six thousand official members. To be a member, one had to be admitted into the association in the presence of three members, observe in the strictest manner the traditional laws regarding Levitical purity, and be a faithful observer of all connected religious duties. Their desire for proper observance of the Mosaic

Law led them to disassociate themselves from the common people of the land, unlearned in what they considered to be proper religious dogma.

Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, an afterlife with rewards based on deeds in this life, angels, and the kingdom of God. They were more associated with the synagogues than with the temple in Jerusalem.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night during the Passover week in Jerusalem. The disciple John probably had a place to stay—in the home of family or friends—when he was in Jerusalem. If this was the case, then it is likely that Jesus was staying there also and was on the roof. The roof had a guest chamber and in the usual home could be reached by an outside stairway. Thus, Nicodemus could have privately come to Jesus and held the important conversation recorded in John 3. This also would explain how this conversation became public record, as John was likely privileged to hear it.

Nicodemus entered the guest room and offered due respect to Jesus. The title *rabbi* showed respect for a person whose teaching had influence. Note that Nicodemus reflected the opinion of others besides himself: “We know that thou art a teacher come from God” (v. 2). The acknowledgment that Jesus came from God was a huge step for a proper Jerusalem Pharisee. Jesus was known to be a Galilean.

In Jesus’ opening statement to Nicodemus, He began with the word *verily*, which means “truly.” The double emphasis shows Jesus was giving an absolute truth. Jesus made no exceptions in this sentence: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). This is true for every human being.

What does it mean to be *born again*? The phrase can also be translated “born from above.” This is related to John 1:12-13: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons

of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” This is because the new birth originates in the eternal kingdom of God and comes to us through God’s grace in Christ.

What is this *kingdom of God*? It is the manifestation of God’s divine power, authority, and rule. It includes the reality of Heaven but also includes the earthly manifestation of God’s power in Jesus Christ.

The truth of the Gospel is not irrational or illogical. Nevertheless, it is not comprehended as saving faith by the natural mind. The work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to reveal Gospel truth to the listener. It is the responsibility of the listener, however, to desire the truth and be willing to receive it when revealed.

That the natural mind, even a religious one, cannot fully discern saving truth is clear in Nicodemus’ response. Jesus’ words about the kingdom of God went unnoticed. Nicodemus could not move past being “born again.” This religious leader was trapped in a mindset that kept him from discerning spiritual truth. He was thinking in physical terms about new birth.

§ *Why might a religious person find it difficult to understand spiritual truth?*

B. The Second Birth (John 3:5-8)

⁵ Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. ⁸ The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

To be “born again” is not a psychological process, although the human psyche is impacted by regeneration. We live in an age of syncretism of religion, psychology, and popular self-helpism. Some speak movingly of the need to be psychologically born again. But such teaching fails to

address our fundamental problem: sin. Unless we are born again by the Holy Spirit, we are enslaved under the bondage of sin.

What does it mean to be “born of water and of the Spirit” (v. 5)? The water is a reference to baptism. It is the public sign that a person has accepted the truth of the Gospel. But water baptism of itself is nothing. The real work is done by the Holy Spirit, convicting us of our sins and leading us to repentance (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit then takes up residence in our hearts and is the personal deposit guaranteeing our eternal salvation (Eph. 1:13-14).

Jesus explained that while the work of the Spirit is mysterious, it is nonetheless real (John 3:8). Humanity cannot generate the wind. All we can do is respond to it. Because we cannot generate the wind or even accurately forecast it does not mean it is not real. The same is true of the work of the Holy Spirit. He is real, alive, and is the blessed third person of the Trinity doing His redeeming work in our lives.

God’s Mysterious Breath

The wind of the Spirit blows where He wills. We hear the sound, we see the evidence, but we know not how this mysterious breath of God touches human hearts.

God builds His church in the most unlikely ways and places, stirring the convictions of the heart, bringing men and women to the knowledge of sin, to repentance, to the Savior himself—and knitting them together in His body.—Charles Colson

2. CHRIST LIFTED UP FORESHADOWED

A. “How Can This Be?” (John 3:9-11)

⁹ Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? ¹¹ Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

Just as Nicodemus could not understand being “born again,” he also had difficulty with how the Holy Spirit works in life. His question in verse 9 is characteristic of people when confronted with the power of the Gospel: “How can this be?” (NIV).

Luke 1:34 has a similar statement from Mary to Gabriel when informed of God’s plan for her: “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” Her question, along with that of Nicodemus, reflects the natural tendency of humanity to view reality from the limited perspective of the natural. Gabriel answered Mary with the proclamation that the Holy Spirit would be the agent of conception of Israel’s Messiah and that “with God nothing shall be impossible” (v. 37).

This truth is the same for everyone who asks “How?” when confronted with the promise of God. Through our limited human perspective, the promises of God seem difficult, if not outright impossible. But faith has eyes that see past the limitation of the natural. Faith sees God on the horizon! Faith looks past the skepticism, doubt, and even cynicism of man and sees the majesty and power of Almighty God! Faith understands that the spirit of the world cannot comprehend the things of God but that the Holy Spirit reveals the glory of the Father’s good plans for us.

Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for his failure to truly discern spiritual truth (John 3:10). This rebuke was justified because Nicodemus had the Old Testament Scriptures. These Scriptures clearly revealed Almighty God and the power of faith.

Jesus affirmed the truth of what He spoke by acknowledging the work of the triune God (v. 11). “We speak that we do know” shows the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the voice and life of the Savior. His knowledge of spiritual things was firsthand knowledge. Yet His eyewitness knowledge of the heavenly kingdom was rejected by the Jews.

Truth Found

When I found truth, there found I my God, who is the truth itself.—Augustine

B. Heavenly Things (John 3:12-15)

¹² If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? ¹³ And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: ¹⁵ That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The “earthly things” (v. 12) refers to the demonstration of Jesus’ miracles and power. Even the fact that many of the Jews were eyewitnesses of His power did not lead them to true faith. The reality of the new birth and the ministry of the Holy Spirit on earth was rejected even by their leaders. If they could not comprehend matters that occurred on earth, how would they ever comprehend heavenly things if Jesus revealed them?

In verse 13, Jesus referred to Himself as “the Son of man.” This was His favorite personal title referring to His earthly ministry. He came for the sake of lost humanity. He willingly gave up the divine honors and privileges of Heaven to take on the weaknesses and limitations of human flesh. As the Son of Man, He descended from Heaven and became like us to demonstrate divine love. This is why only He could accurately tell of the Father’s divine intervention. No human being ever ascended into Heaven in order to bring back to earth revelation from God. Jesus did what was impossible for humanity; He descended as the Son of Man, fully human and fully divine, to secure our salvation.

The ministry of the Son of Man is revealed in three major areas. First, the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10; see also Matt. 9:1-8). Second, the Son of Man suffered and died (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Third, the Son of Man will return in the clouds with great power and glory (Mark 13:26).

\$ *Compare and construct the uplifted pole in Numbers 21:7-9 with “the Son of Man be[ing] lifted up” (John 3:14).*

3. ACCEPT SALVATION; ENTER THE LIGHT

A. God's Love (John 3:16-17)

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Most commentators believe the conversation with Nicodemus ended at verse 15, and the remainder of this section (vv. 16-21) belongs to the inspired pen of John. However, many Bibles that highlight the words of Jesus in red include these verses, a decision made by the editors of those particular Bibles.

John 3:16 is probably the single most well-known verse in the Bible. Dr. John Bright once told a theology class that John 3:16 is the most difficult text in the Bible from which to preach. He reasoned that its simplicity and power could not be added to by human thought and words. In fact, our feeble efforts to expound on this verse often detract from its life-changing power. Even so, it is worth our time to examine each phrase and rejoice in the wondrous love given to us in the new birth.

“For God” takes us back to verses 14 and 15. There we find the lifting up of the Son of Man is a healing, redemptive act of grace whereby the sinful curse is broken. This lifting up leads to faith. This faith is described in verse 15—“that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” This is the same Greek phrase as in the final part of verse 16.

The main verb, “loved,” emphasizes God’s divine love. The tense indicates a completed and full love that is never inadequate, nor does it grow insufficient with time. From eternity, God, who is love, has been expressing His love. “The world” includes not only every individual in the world but also the totality of all created order. God’s desire is to redeem all creation and restore it to its divine purpose. This word picture shows the personal nature of God and His love. God is not an

impersonal force who has set into motion irreversible laws of nature. God loves His creation and desires to save.

God “gave.” Isn’t this the character of love? Almighty God descended into human flesh because of His love for us. God surrendered, willingly gave in, for the sake of our redemption. His character would allow Him to do nothing else. His desire has never been to condemn humanity to eternal damnation. Rather, His eternal desire is that His creatures enjoy the blessings of His presence. This eternal love was most clearly manifested in the sending of the eternal Son of God. Jesus is God’s only begotten Son. The Virgin Birth testifies to our Lord’s divinity.

In this humanistic age, people want to know about the humanity of Jesus. But this knowledge apart from a firm understanding of His divinity leads to heresy and uncertainty concerning personal salvation. Our salvation is based on the fact that the sinless Son of God became one of us and paid the full price for our redemption.

This truth leads to one proper response from humanity: to “believe” on Him. Faith in Christ is the key that unlocks the prison of eternal death. In Biblical thought, faith and works go hand in hand. Works are not the basis of faith. Rather, works flow from the reality of our eternal life in Christ through faith. Works cannot secure our salvation; nevertheless, they are signs of the fact we are saved by grace.

The opposite of perishing is to “have everlasting life.” Christ came into the world to deliver us from the dominion of spiritual darkness and death. Life comes from Christ, and eternal life is secured by faith in Him.

Verse 17 is just as powerful as verse 16. The word *sent* is from the same word from which we get the noun *apostle*. God sent Jesus with the divine commission to seek and save the lost. Jesus was not sent with the message of divine condemnation. Humanity is guilty of sin and deserves divine

judgment. But God has revealed His righteousness through the Gospel of mercy and grace. The Son has come to pronounce forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who believe.

A New Existence

The root meaning in Hebrew of *salvation* is to be broad, to become spacious, to enlarge. It carries the sense of deliverance from an existence that has become compressed, confined, and cramped.—

Eugene Peterson

B. God's Light (John 3:18-21)

¹⁸ He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

²¹ But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

Humanity's failure to believe in Christ is evident in the continued walk in spiritual darkness. The judgment, or condemnation, that comes from rejecting the Gospel manifests itself in sinful acts.

Even though the light has come into the world, people prefer to live in spiritual darkness (v. 19). The Apostle Paul wrote, "For you were once darkness. . . . Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness. . . . [For] it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret" (Eph. 5:8, 11-12 NIV).

The dominion of sin is so great that those who love evil prefer to remain in that condition. They hate the light and will do all to extinguish it. They cannot abide in the light because it exposes and reproves their evil (John 3:20). This truth is evidenced in our own society where sinful people actively work to remove prayer from public domain. The Bible has been removed from public life because it exposes the darkness of our national immorality. Nations would rather struggle in the decay and death of calamity than admit the truth of God's Word and repent.

Verse 21 shows the only escape from the dominion of darkness is love for the truth. The person who has never heard the Gospel yet seeks after the truth will respond to the light of the Gospel and

believe in Christ. The lover of the truth will allow his or her deeds to be measured by the truth of the Word. They will not remain in darkness but will live in the light of truth.

Paul wrote, “You are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)” (Eph. 5:8-9 NIV).

§ *How does love for the truth bring us to the light of the Gospel?*

LIGHT, TRUTH, AND LOVE

The born-again person enters the world of light, truth, and love. God’s redeeming love opens our eyes to our own pitiful condition. When we experience deliverance from guilt and the joy of salvation, we discover something that cannot be duplicated by the world. The love of Christ that redeems us comes and lives in our lives by the abiding presence of Christ.

Our own salvation should open our eyes to the lost in our midst. If we realize we have been saved from the terrors of hell, then we should strive to share with others the message of deliverance.

Daily Devotions

- M. An Acceptable Offering (Genesis 4:3-7)
- T. The Scapegoat (Leviticus 16:15-22)
- W. The Suffering Savior (Isaiah 53:4-7)
- T. Christ’s Effective Sacrifice (Romans 5:6-11)
- F. Old Sacrificial System Replaced (Hebrews 10:5-10)
- S. Worthy Is the Lamb! (Revelation 5:6-13)