



# International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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## John 3:1-16 New American Standard Bible April 9, 2017

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, April 9, 2017**, is from **John 3:1-16**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

**(John 3:1) Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;**

The Pharisees were committed to following the law and traditions of their elders. They focused on learning all the biblical interpretations of their teachers (rabbis) past and present and how to apply them in people's daily lives. They debated the teachings of their rabbis, what was true in their interpretations, and how they should best be applied. The Jewish ruling council was the Sanhedrin, which was composed of seventy rabbis or elders; thus, Nicodemus was one of the most influential people in Israel. He represents the Old Covenant as it had been revised continually by the Pharisees. Later, he is mentioned in John 7:50-51 — "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?'" and in John 19:39 — "He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds."

**(John 3:2) this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."**

Nicodemus may have come to Jesus by night because he was timid or because he wanted time for a quiet lengthy discussion. He addressed Jesus with respect as "Rabbi" or

“Teacher,” even though he knew Jesus had no officially recognized formal rabbinical education. We do not know how many religious leaders Nicodemus represented when he said “we.” He did say that the signs Jesus performed were good and sufficient reasons to believe that Jesus had come from God: the signs left no doubt that God was with Jesus. Nicodemus wanted to learn more from someone he knew had come from God. Later, most religious leaders would suppress the truth they had learned about Jesus and seek His death (see Romans 1:18 — “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,” and Romans 1:25 — “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.”)

**(John 3:3) Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

John tells us the most important points in their discussion. The Greek “Amen, amen” can be translated “verily, verily” or “very truly” or “truly, truly” or “factually, factually” or “with absolute certainty.” Jesus (and Paul) insisted that focusing on religious laws, studying religious laws and traditions, and doing good works would not lead to recognizing or seeing or entering the kingdom of God. More than what we can think and do ourselves is needed. We must be born again, born anew, or born from above. God must remake us and enable us to see and enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was a noted religious teacher, but he must be born again to see and enter the kingdom of God.

**(John 3:4) Nicodemus \*said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”**

Nicodemus might have been pursuing the ways of the Pharisees by asking questions as part of a religious debate, or he may have been seriously asking this question from puzzlement. He might have thought Jesus literally meant a person needed to go back into his mother’s womb, which he knew was impossible.

**(John 3:5) Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.**

Jesus did not answer him as a rabbi would have done by quoting the Old Testament or former rabbis. Jesus spoke with authority and told him spiritual facts that were beyond his complete understanding, especially at that point in their discussion. Consistent with the preaching of the good news, in my opinion, “born of water” includes or means repentance and baptism and “the Spirit” includes or means faith in Jesus Christ as Lord

and Savior. See John 3:16 — “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” and Acts 2:38 — “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

**(John 3:6) “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**

A man and woman’s flesh gives birth to a child of flesh. “Water” in John 3:5 may be thought of in this context, since babies are carried first in water before they are physically born. When the Holy Spirit enters believers by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they are spiritually born again or brought to spiritual life. John does not record how much Jesus explained to Nicodemus: we need the rest of the New Testament to learn more about the Holy Spirit and His work.

**(John 3:7) “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’**

Based on Nicodemus’ vast knowledge of the Old Testament and rabbinic discussions, Jesus told him that he should not be surprised that a person’s life must be totally changed, that he must be born again in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. One must change and turn from selfishness and a totally self-centered concern with respect to obeying the law in order to be right with God to something totally new. One must change to living by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, which involves nothing less than a total life transformation as the result of being born again. One must be born again to turn from loving one’s own self supremely to loving God supremely with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength.

**(John 3:8) “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

Only God can understand all the fine details of how and why the wind blows in different ways over various cities and countries around the world at different times. Likewise, no human being can understand the details of how and why different people around the world come by grace to saving faith in Jesus Christ and receive the Holy Spirit to indwell and work within them in the kingdom of God.

**(John 3:9) Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”**

Nicodemus asked the question almost all believers and many unbelievers who have heard the gospel have asked. Nicodemus still wanted to know how someone can be born

again. Perhaps thousands of books have been written to explain what Jesus said about the new birth, but exactly how the new birth occurs cannot be known by us with our limited human understanding and finite minds, even after we are born again.

**(John 3:10) Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”**

Nicodemus did not understand these things because he had not come down from heaven and he was not the Son of God. Jesus’ question should have led Nicodemus to a humbler opinion of himself. Nicodemus was recognized in Jerusalem and perhaps in all of Israel as “THE teacher” (in the Greek text). He was “the teacher” above all others. Jesus indicated that no religious leader can fully understand these truths. No human being has the capacity to understand fully these truths. Jesus is the one and only begotten Son of God; those who believe in Him are adopted children of God. As adopted children of God, we will never understand the Father as fully as Jesus does. We must humble ourselves and come to trust in Jesus and His teachings without completely understanding everything or having all our questions answered. It is enough to know that Jesus came from God and God was with him as Nicodemus knew from observing the signs Jesus performed. See John 20:30 — “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

**(John 3:11) “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.”**

The “we” probably looked ahead and referred to Jesus and His disciples, who followed Jesus and who would testify about what Jesus taught after His death and resurrection. The “we” might also have referred to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and their testimony. “You people” might have referred to the Pharisees and religious leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus, and later His disciples, were rejected by many of the religious leaders, who were responsible for His arrest and crucifixion. Jesus and His disciples could testify about Jesus changing water into wine and other actions that demonstrated His divine wisdom and power with absolute certainty. Jesus could testify with absolute certainty about what He had seen and heard from God the Father in heaven before He was born in human flesh. “Testify” and “testimony” are legal terms for saying something under oath that a person has witnessed personally with their eyes (or with any of their senses) instead of having heard about something second hand or through rumors or from other’s opinions. In other words, what they spoke with absolute certainty was of the quality that it could hold up as true evidence in a court of law.

**(John 3:12) “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”**

Jesus was an eye witness to heavenly things. He was and is the Word that was with God the Father from the beginning, so He could testify about everything that His Father and He had done from the beginning (or even before they began time and creation). But Jesus knew that Nicodemus and many others would not believe what He said about heaven, because they would not believe what He told people about the world in which they lived. Later, John indicates in his gospel that Nicodemus came to believe in Jesus.

**(John 3:13) “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.”**

No one has ever obeyed the law perfectly or has contemplated religious ideas perfectly and become qualified to go into heaven. No one has succeeded in going to heaven and bringing down true and trustworthy knowledge about heaven. The only One who has brought the true knowledge of heaven to us is Jesus, the Son of Man. Jesus used the title “Son of Man” for himself, a title He took from the Old Testament. Consider Daniel 7:13, “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, *one* like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him” (KJV). Jesus claimed to be the Son of Man that Daniel saw. Some contemporary translations make this comparison less clear when they translate “Son of man” as “human being.” Jesus came into the world fully God and fully human being. The title also expressed His humility, because at other times He indicated that He was the Son of God. He would not directly claim before unbelievers that He was the Son of God, but He would strongly imply the claim as the time neared for Him to be crucified with a charge of blasphemy against Him. He descended from heaven when He was born, and after His resurrection He ascended back into heaven (which proved that God the Father accepted His words and works as authentically divine, trustworthy, and without sin).

**(John 3:14) “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;**

Once, when the Israelites sinned against God in the wilderness, God sent poisonous serpents among them and many were bitten and died. God also provided a way for them to be forgiven for their sins and be healed from their bites so they would not die. According to the command of God, Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole and all who looked at the serpent lived (see Numbers 21:8-9). It may not have made sense to some of the Israelites, so some did not look up and they died. In a similar way, Jesus foretold His being lifted up upon a cross and dying and rising again so all who would look to Him in faith would be forgiven, saved from their sins, and inherit eternal life.

Even today, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ does not make sense to some people, so they will not look to Him in order to be born again, filled with the Holy Spirit, and live forever with Him. However, whether some will believe or not, Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life that God the Father has provided for people to look up to and trust in to be saved.

**(John 3:15) so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.**

Nicodemus would not understand all that Jesus told him that night, but he would remember the example of the serpent on the pole when he saw Jesus crucified. God the Father may have brought this to his remembrance, even as He revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Messiah (see Matthew 16:16-17). The fact that Nicodemus honored Jesus in His death indicates that He had come to believe and have eternal life (eternal life includes a holy, loving, spiritual quality of life that can begin now in relationship with God in Jesus Christ as well as a blessed and happy life with God that will never end).

**(John 3:16) “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”**

That night, Jesus told Nicodemus enough for him to believe in Him, to be born again, and to have eternal life. Jesus came to teach the truth, die, and rise again, but He did not explain everything He would do to Nicodemus that night. Because God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) loved the world, Jesus came to die in our place. He came as the sacrifice for our sins. When the time was right, God the Father fulfilled the Old Testament laws and prophecies. He gave His only begotten Son so everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish (suffer God’s just judgment and continue existing apart from or separated from God forever) but have eternal life (live in holy love with God forever). God will fulfill all His promises in Jesus Christ, and if we want to have eternal life, we must believe in Jesus Christ, His one and only Son, and receive the Holy Spirit.

### **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further**

1. How did John describe Nicodemus?
2. What did Nicodemus believe about Jesus? Give a reason for your answer.
3. What must happen before someone can see the kingdom of God?
4. How did Jesus say someone could enter the kingdom of God? What does His answer mean to you?

5. Who has eternal life? Why do they have eternal life?

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Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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