

Face to Face With Jesus

Doubters

John 3:1-21

Leaders Guide

Have you ever doubted anything? Have you ever questioned your faith or the teachings of your denomination or the practices of the church you attend? If so, you are not alone. Even in the first century there were strong, faithful believers who were questioning the practices of their faith and the interpretations of their religious leaders.

The word **doubt** is defined as a feeling of uncertainty about the truth, reality, or nature of something; to be undecided in opinion or belief; to regard with suspicion. Nicodemus had doubts. So he sought out Jesus to find some answers.

The Pharisee

Jesus had a nighttime visitor. Perhaps because it was the only time you could find him away from the crowds and have a serious one-on-one conversation. Perhaps because the visit could be kept secret.

Read John 3:1-2.

Answer the following questions:

- Who was Nicodemus? What is a Pharisee and how did they practice their faith? (google it if you don't have a study Bible or a Bible dictionary)
- What had Nicodemus seen or heard that disturbed him enough to seek answers beyond the scholars, teachers, and scribes of the temple?
- What do you think was the reason he visited Jesus at night?
- This is not the only place where Nicodemus is mentioned in John's gospel. Read John 7:50-52 and 19:38-42. What do these stories tell you about Nicodemus?

Born Again

In the phrase *born again* (Greek ***gennao anothēn***), the word for *again*, ***anothen***, can also mean from above, from the beginning, or on high. The entire Greek phrase can also be translated as one word, rebirth, in English. One can certainly understand the confusion Nicodemus would have felt when hearing this. He apparently took it literally to mean a physical return to the womb. Jesus explained it as a double rebirth through both water and the spirit.

N. T. Wright explains that “the Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family. What mattered was being a child of Abraham...Now, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth isn’t enough. You need to be born all over again, born ‘from above’.”

Read John 3:3-8 and Titus 3:4-5.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- How did Jesus explain what born again means?
- What do water and spirit rebirth mean to you?
- What does Jesus say is necessary for entering the kingdom of God?
- Do you feel an obligation to follow specific rules, perform a list of activities, or worship in a strictly defined way? What would Jesus say about that? Check out Matthew 10:22, Mark 16:16, and Luke 8:9-12 for help.

Level B

- What does water symbolize for you? How does that connect with baptism and rebirth in your faith journey?
- Explain how the spirit gives birth to spirit in verse 6. What does that signify to you? Look at Acts 2:1-4. Explain how believers were reborn with the spirit that day?
- According to Jesus’ words, how difficult is it to enter the kingdom of God? Nicodemus was raised to believe that it was a struggle and a sacrifice to become perfectly righteous. One had to earn their way into God’s kingdom. How did Jesus’ words contradict that thinking?

Level C

- A seashell is often used as a Christian symbol of baptism. The animals inside the shell can only live in water which feeds and cleanses them—and some of them contain a pearl. Discuss this image and its use as a symbol of being reborn in water.
- We often hear the Holy Spirit being expressed as the breath of God. How does that description help connect you to rebirth in your faith?
- According to Bickel & Jantz, “Jesus was upsetting the social order by proclaiming that God was more interested in the condition of a person’s heart than his adherence to rules and regulations.” How does that emphasis compare with Pharisaic thought?

Lifted Up

Nicodemus is still unsure. He needs more information, more specifics, more proof. But faith is difficult to prove.

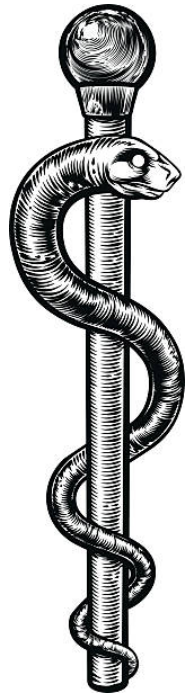
Note to leaders: The image to the right is the Rod of Asclepius. In Greek mythology Asclepius was a deity associated with healing and medicine. Scholars note that it looks like the image of the snake and rod mentioned in Numbers. The connection has been debated. The symbol appeared in Greece around the same time that the event occurred in Numbers so scholars think it unlikely that the Greeks got it from the Hebrews or vice versa. It is not the Caduceus which is used as a medical symbol today. The Caduceus was actually the staff of the Greek god, Apollo, and symbolized commerce, not healing, in ancient Greece.

Read John 3:9-15.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- Why did Jesus challenge Nicodemus’ lack of understanding?
- The “we” used in verse 11 indicates that there were other people testifying about Jesus’ ministry. Who might those people have been?
- Why did Nicodemus have to believe earthly truths before he could accept heavenly truths? How does that apply to us?
- Read Numbers 21:4-9. What was the purpose of the snake on the staff to the people of Moses’ time? How does that connect to Jesus?



Level B

- Have you ever heard a statement so unsettling, that you could not believe it without more evidence? What is a constructive way to face our doubts?
- Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to believe earthly truths before he could accept heavenly ones. Sometimes truth is hard to find in our world. According to the police, even eyewitness accounts are different depending upon the point of view and the individual's memory. How do you decide who to believe, especially about "heavenly" things?
- Read Numbers 21:4-9. In order to be healed what did the bitten have to do? This passage is often seen as a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus on the cross. It symbolizes that only by lifting Christ up, on the cross, and looking at him could the healing of our sinful soul begin. How do you feel about that image?

Level C

- What do you do when you have doubt? How can we testify to the truth of our faith in a way that can help those with doubt? Do you have any eyewitness stories that can help? Share with your group.
- Read Numbers 21:4-9. This is often seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus dying on the cross. N.T.Wright states, "Humankind as a whole has been smitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the son of man dying on the cross, and find life through believing in him!" Discuss this statement with your group.
- "God...has planted a sign in the middle of history, and the sign says: believe, and live." (N.T.Wright) Reread John 3:15. It sounds simple. Why is it difficult for Nicodemus and us to do it?

The Great Truth

The first verse of this section was one that many Christians know by heart. The subsequent verses may not be as familiar. Here lies the heart of the gospel, the great truth. Since Nicodemus eventually became a follower, this message must have resonated with him. Perhaps it was what turned a doubter into a believer.

Read John 3:16-21.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- Why did God send Jesus?
- What condemns a person to death?
- John used light as a frequent symbol in his gospel. How did Jesus explain and use light in these verses to emphasize what he wanted Nicodemus to understand?

Level B

- How do these verses explain God's plan for our salvation? How do they counter the negatives of "fearing" God?
- If not believing in Jesus condemns a person to death, what is the focus of all Christians? See Matthew 28:18-20.
- Read Acts 13:47, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-6, and 1 John 2:9-11. How were the disciples and followers of Jesus living his words in John 3:19-21? How are we?

Level C

- Although believers are also called "sons of God" (2 Corinthians 6:18, Revelation 21:7), how is Jesus' claim unique and different from ours?
- Why is it so difficult to accept that all we have to do is believe? What do you think is the greatest barrier to belief? How do you explain your belief to others?
- Read John 8:12 and Matthew 5:14-16. Jesus applies the title "Light of the World" to himself in one verse and to us in the other. Why are both correct? How would you explain this to a person who was confused by this dichotomy?

Resources

Books

Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008)

Brand, Draper, England, ed., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003)

Strong, James, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance Of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996)

Wright, Tom, *John for Everyone* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2004)

Online

Campbell, Mike, 2021, *Biblical Names*, The Etymology and History of First Names, www.behindthename.com

Weiner & Whittmore, 2022, *Pharisees & Sadducees Beliefs & Encounters with Jesus*, www.Study.com