

SMALL GROUP • GOSPEL OF JOHN

Week 3 Preparation Guide

Born Again

John 3:1-21

BIG IDEA

Following Jesus isn't about becoming better—it's about becoming new.

For Thursday's conversation

Begin with prayer

PRAYER

Father, help me come to this passage not merely looking for information, but willing to be changed. Show me who Jesus is, show me what is true about my own heart, and help me understand what it means to live as someone made new by your Spirit. Amen.

Before you begin, read John 2:23–3:21. The final verses of John 2 matter: people were impressed by Jesus' signs, but Jesus “knew what was in man.” Immediately afterward, John introduces Nicodemus.

1. Nicodemus: religious, respected, still needy

Do not picture Nicodemus as an obvious sinner whose life is falling apart. He is almost the opposite: a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and later called “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10). He knows Scripture, takes God seriously, and has likely lived a disciplined religious life.

JESUS' WORDS

“You must be born again.”

John 3:7 (ESV)

Jesus does not merely tell immoral people they need transformation. He tells an extremely religious man that his religion cannot give him the life he needs. Church attendance, Bible knowledge, small group, serving, and being a good husband or father are good things—but none can replace dependence upon Jesus.

REFLECT Where am I tempted to substitute Christian activity for actually walking with Christ?

2. What does “born again” mean?

Nicodemus hears Jesus literally: how can an old man be born a second time? Jesus is describing spiritual regeneration—God giving spiritual life to someone who cannot manufacture that life himself. Salvation is God’s work, not ours.

Notice Jesus’ comparison to the wind in verse 8. You cannot control the wind, but you can see what it does. Likewise, the Holy Spirit produces genuine change in someone.

The Ezekiel 36 connection

When Jesus speaks of “water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), one strong interpretation is that he expects Israel’s teacher to recognize Ezekiel 36:25–27: God promises cleansing, a new heart, and his Spirit within his people. Jesus is not announcing a religious upgrade. He is describing the new life God promised.

GOD’S PROMISE

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you.”

Ezekiel 36:26–27a (ESV)

Cleansing + new heart + God’s Spirit = new life. This helps explain Jesus’ question: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10).

3. The bronze serpent and the cross

In John 3:14–15, Jesus points back to Numbers 21:4–9. Israel rebelled, venomous snakes came among the people, and God instructed Moses to lift up a bronze serpent. Anyone bitten could look at God’s provision and live.

JESUS’ COMPARISON

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

John 3:14–15 (ESV)

Jesus is pointing forward to the cross. The Israelites could not cure themselves; they had to trust God’s provision. Likewise, sinners do not rescue themselves through morality, religion, achievement, or effort. We look to Christ in faith.

4. God loved. God gave. We believe. We receive life.

John 3:16 can be so familiar that it is easy to stop hearing how extraordinary it is. Read it slowly. Christianity begins with what God has done, not with what we accomplish.

SCRIPTURE

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 (ESV)

SCRIPTURE

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

John 3:17 (ESV)

The cross reveals both the seriousness of our sin and the extraordinary depth of God’s love. God’s love is the motivation behind salvation.

REFLECT When I hear John 3:16–17, what does it show me about God’s heart toward a world in need of rescue?

5. Light and darkness

Jesus moves from new birth and God’s love to light and darkness. The problem is not simply that people lack information. Light exposes what we would rather keep hidden.

SCRIPTURE

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”

John 3:19 (ESV)

This makes the passage personal. The call is not merely to agree with Christian facts, but increasingly to come into the light—where Christ exposes and transforms us. Consider ambition, pride, anger, control, fear, a habit, or how you treat your family when you are tired.

REFLECT What part of my life am I most tempted to keep away from Jesus’ light?

6. Prepare for Thursday’s small-group questions

What’s the difference between religion and a relationship with Jesus?

Biblical practices are good. The problem is trusting those practices rather than Christ. Religion can become: “I obey so God will accept me.” The gospel says: “In Christ, God has graciously saved me; therefore I now desire to obey him.”

Why do people struggle with the idea of needing new birth?

Consider pride. Improvement can feel flattering because we still get to fix ourselves. New birth means admitting: I cannot save myself.

How has God’s love changed your life?

Prepare your answer, not merely a theological answer. Consider: Before—what did you depend on, pursue, fear, or believe? Encounter—how did you begin seeing Jesus differently? Now—what is he changing? Not yet—where are you still learning to surrender?

You do not need an impressive testimony. Honesty about ongoing transformation can be far more meaningful.

7. One question to bring to the group

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Are you trying harder to become a better version of yourself, or are you learning to surrender yourself to the transforming work of Jesus?

Christian discipleship certainly involves effort and obedience. But Christian transformation is not self-reconstruction. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV). The goal is not merely a better version of yourself; it is increasingly becoming the person Christ is forming you to be.

Between now and Thursday

READ JOHN 3:1-21 THREE TIMES

First, read normally. Second, read watching Nicodemus. Third, read noting everything God does throughout the passage.

READ THE BACKSTORY

Read Numbers 21:4–9 and Ezekiel 36:22–27. They make Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus much richer.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE

Memorize John 3:16 or John 3:17. Write it below once from memory, then check it against your Bible.

Closing reflection

PRAY THIS HONESTLY

Jesus, where am I trying to improve myself when what I really need is to surrender more fully to your work in me?

Sit with that question before the Lord this week. It may become the most important preparation you do for Thursday.