

Life's Greatest Question Answered
Part 1 and Part 2: Lesson should be taught over 2 sessions.

Scripture Focus

John 3:1-16

Key Verse

"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. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:16-17).

Overview

The gospel is both uniquely profound and uniquely simple at the same time. By God's grace, it takes but a moment to believe the gospel and yet an eternity to unravel its mysteries. As a result, it has the answers to life's greatest questions about God, man, and the purpose of life.

Theme

The gospel is the foundation of redemption. Without it, the world would be left to despair in hopeless misery because of time. Yet, God has not left us without a Redeemer!

Desired Learner Response

The learner will grow in his understanding of the gospel and its power to save.

Outline

- I. **The Question of Life (vv. 1-8)**
- II. **The Quencher of Life (vv. 9-12, 17-18)**
- III. **The Quantity of Life (vv. 13-14)**
- IV. **The Quality of Life (vv 15-16)**

Getting Started

There are great threats facing every corner of the globe. Many people today live in fear. Some parts of the world live in fear of contaminated food like the 9000 Japanese students who were made ill after eating school lunches contaminated with the E-Coli bacteria. [**Ask:** How would you feel if every time you sat down to eat, you wondered if the food was going to kill you or not?] Many people in our world live with the fear of being the victim of a car or bus bombing like those 23 people who lost their lives when the bus they were on exploded as one of their fellow passengers ignited a bomb strapped to his body? [**Ask:** How would you feel if every time you traveled to work or school or shopping there was an imminent threat of you and your family being exploded?] Thousands of our soldiers in Iraq live daily with the fear of being the target of a sniper's weapon. Like so many of our defenders of freedom who have been going about their duty and lost their lives, so too are there countless others who will be on duty when the shot rings out. [**Ask:** How

would you feel if every time you went to work, you were threatened with the possibility of a sniper's gun pointed at you? Can you imagine the reaction of these people who daily live with the fear of death if something were to happen where that fear was removed? We saw some of the reaction of the Iraqi people as Saddam's statue and other symbols of this agent of death were removed. Those people, however, knew that they still had the fear of death looming over them. What can be done to help people in Iraq, China, the nations of the world, and even our own city know that death no longer has to be an enemy? It is in the message that every believer carries to every person we encounter.

Searching the Scriptures

Jesus answers in John 3 the question, "How can I be free from the fear of death?" This is the ultimate question of the nations of the world, the citizens of Jacksonville, and your neighbors. The answer is why every God-called missionary leaves the comforts of our home and church to go to people who would otherwise have no opportunity to know how to be free from the fear of death. Our call is to live like we are the only people that have the message of eternal life and the only chance our neighbors, city, nation, and world have of hearing the gospel. [Note: Throughout the lesson emphasize that this message of salvation is the very reason God is tarrying in sending His Son. It is this same message that is changing the lives of millions around the world and can change the life of anyone in Jacksonville who will say yes to Jesus. This is a lesson that presents every person in your class with an opportunity to join those of every tribe, tongue, and nation in the great song of salvation through Jesus.] But what actions would be taken if the Christian community was vocal about a great threat to the lives of the world? What steps would be followed if the world only knew that they could have absolute freedom from the fear of death? That nothing could ever threaten their lives again? In this passage of scripture the mystery of the ages, the eternal question of life is presented and answered. We will answer the question today "How can I be free from the fear of death?" This passage gives us four motivating factors to receive eternal life, four motivations to trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

[At the end of each section is an exegetical study of the words and concepts in each verse for that section.]

I. The Question of Life (vv. 1-8)

Explanation: Contained in these first eight verses we find the prevailing question of all time: Have you been born again? A man named Nicodemus asked it. Verse 1 gives us background into the life of this man. He was rich, far beyond the wealth of the commoner; he was respected, for he held one of the highest positions in all the land as a Pharisee; and Nicodemus was religious. But somehow the wealth had lost its worth, the lofty position had bent low, and the religious routines had left him reaching for something real.

Scripture tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. The night is highly significant in this Gospel. It is the night that causes us to stumble; it was into the

night that the betrayer of Jesus fled; it was in the night that the one closest to Jesus would deny Him three times. Here we see Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. Perhaps his quest for the truth was shrouded in fear of being labeled a traitor; perhaps his hunger for righteousness was clothed in the garment of secrecy. When Nicodemus approached Christ he confessed that only the power of God could accomplish the works Jesus had done. It is interesting that in verse 2, Nicodemus said “we know.” He was one of many Pharisees who were beginning to believe that Christ was the Messiah, but he was the only religious leader willing to come to Christ to personally discover the truth.

In verse 3 Jesus answers Nicodemus’ question before it is asked. Jesus knew the real reason Nicodemus was coming to Him. Jesus tells this respected religious leader just how far he is from the Kingdom of God. We see the cry of the Savior’s heart. Nicodemus, you are a wealthy man, but your wealth has no value in God’s Kingdom. Nicodemus, you are a respected man, but the respect of the world does nothing to elevate you in God’s sight. Nicodemus, you are at the pinnacle of religious practice and prominence, but all of your good religious works have no merit in God’s Kingdom. In his natural state Nicodemus could neither envision nor enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” With all his understanding Nicodemus could not reason out how he could be born again. As a Pharisee who focused on the physical, he knew it was physically impossible to enter a second time into his mother’s belly and be born again. Jesus has often been accused by scholars of being obscure in his response to Nicodemus. But Jesus was not concealing the truth, He was revealing the truth.

When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again, it would have no doubt reminded Nicodemus of Ezekiel’s message which told of the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. To be born again was to be given new life in Christ and cleansed by His Holy Spirit. Then and only then could Nicodemus gain access to the Kingdom of God. A life of working to enter the Kingdom was lost in one stroke. Nicodemus could do nothing to enter God’s Kingdom; it was and is only a work of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We know in verse 6 that Nicodemus needed to have a spiritual birth to make him heir to God’s Kingdom. Jesus gives a wonderful illustration describing those who have asked the question “how can I be born again?” and accepted the answer of a spiritual birth. We know the wind has its own laws; it is not answerable to any man or woman. So it is with the Spirit of God. As the branches of the tree testify to the blowing wind’s presence, so do the person’s thoughts, words, and deeds give testimony of the Holy Spirit. The wind of the Spirit was blowing into the soul of Nicodemus, and he had to respond. It is imperative that when the Holy Spirit is convicting that the soul responds while it can. Just as we cannot measure how long the wind will blow, neither do we know how long the Spirit will convict.

Illustration: A couple of jr. high school boys had gone into one of the Science labs and conducted some quite unusual experiments with frogs. In fact, it appeared they were either baiting hooks for fishing with them or making Christmas tree ornaments. The assistant principal called the

boys into his cluttered little office. He pointed his finger at them, which seemed to reach across the room, and stuck it right between their eyes. He said, "Sons, I'm going to ask you the most important question of your life. Did you have anything to do with those frogs in the Science lab?" Unfortunately, the weekend prior to this was a youth retreat and the speaker taught on Nicodemus and the theme of the weekend was "Life's Most Important Question." Being a smart mouth teenager, one of the boys responded to the assistant principal with "No." The assistant principal said, "Are you telling me you had nothing to do with those frogs?" The boy responded, "No, I mean, that's not the most important question of my life." At that point, the issue of the frogs suddenly seemed insignificant to the Assistant vice principal!

Application:

Ask: Have you been confronted with the most important question in life? Men, do you remember when you were going to pop the big question? But that was not the most important question your life. Do you remember asking, "Is the pregnancy test positive?" But that was not the most important question. Life's most important question is "have you been born again?" Have you come to that single moment in your life when you surrendered your life, confessed your sins, and trusted in Jesus alone for salvation?

We have many modern day people like Nicodemus in our churches. People who have searched for satisfaction in wealth, but the wealth has lost its worth; people who tried to feel complete by holding exalted positions which have left them empty; and people wanting to feel secure in a salvation that is not theirs by practicing religious rituals. If you are tired of trying to feel saved, if you are weary from working to justify as right what you know is wrong before God, let me place the question in your court – have you been born again? Not have you had a religious experience, not have you been wise in a tough situation, not are you a teacher, not are you a church member, not do you read your Bible. Are you born again? If not, Jesus said you cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Do you realize what is at stake this morning? What is at stake is where you will spend eternity. Note the differences between religion and the gospel. **Religion:** "If I do good, God will love me." **Gospel:** "God loves me and will change me so I can do good."

Extra Exegetical Notes

V. 1 "man of": Same mind; nature; influences.

"Pharisee": Hebrew Separatist: Matt. 15:3-6; 16:11-12; 23:13.

"Ruler": Sanhedrin, counselor of Israel, man of authority. **V. 2** "we know": you have not escaped our notice; Compare with v. 11 where Jesus asserts that it is only the Triune Godhead that knows.

"Rabbi": Great man; Teacher "come from God": not educated or ordained by men like the other leaders. "signs": credentials in the eyes of the rulers; it was not enough just to admire or appreciate the miracles of Christ. **V. 3** "born again": Regeneration – Not making better what is already there; not renovating a new building, but demolishing what is there and constructing a new building. Salvation is instantaneous; it is not 'being born again'; Father originated salvation, Son accomplished salvation, and Spirit applies salvation. "see": To have any part in; to understand the things of God; Sinful man must become saved before seeing the significance of Christ's miracles. **V. 4** The verse

demonstrates that Nicodemus, though professing to be wise, knew nothing of the basic doctrines of salvation. He was a ruler, a leader, and a counselor of God's people, yet had spent a lifetime in vain religious efforts. **V. 5** "water": Physical birth; when a baby is born a flow of water accompanies the birth. "Spirit": Regeneration (see v.3 notes) "enter": Nicodemus assumed that because he was a Jew, one among a chosen people, he had automatic entrance into the Kingdom of God. Jesus presents the exclusive way to heaven, namely Himself. (See John 14:6) **V. 6** "flesh": reference to the previous statement of water birth; physical birth. "Spirit": reference to the previous statement of Spirit birth; spiritual birth; man can only produce physical life; spiritual life can only be produced by God. **V. 7** "marvel": Nicodemus struggled because his erroneous view of salvation by physical birth into the right family; salvation by works; salvation by religious practice; salvation by biblical knowledge all came crashing down in one conversation with Jesus. **V. 8** Man cannot initiate the wind nor can he initiate salvation. Salvation is initiated by the Spirit of God convicting the sinner of sin. Man cannot control where the wind goes nor can he control his own eternity. Eternity is controlled by God. However, just as the effects of the wind are clearly evident to all, so too are the effects of being born again. New birth as a work of God is just as evident as the power of a mighty wind.

II. The Quencher of Life (vv. 9-12, 17-18)

Explanation: In this chapter we see two sections devoted to "life quenchers." They are actions and attitudes that will guarantee someone's entrance to Hell. Christ questions Nicodemus in v. 10 as to his lack of understanding. It is as if Christ is saying, "Nicodemus, you are among the most highly educated men in all the land and you don't know these simple things about salvation." All his religious education had left him without the truth. In v. 11, it is as if Jesus draws the line in the sand – on one side of the line there is the word "We." On the other side of the line there is the word "Ye." On the "We" side were those who had been redeemed throughout the ages, those who had confidence in a glorious future. On the "Ye" side, where Nicodemus stood, were those who looked down the road of life and saw nothing but eternal death.

Look at what kept Nicodemus and all the others on the side of "Ye." Verse 12, "I told you simple things and you did not believe." The revelation of Jesus Christ could not be heard, could not be seen, because of their hard hearts. It was the hardness of their hearts that would keep them out of God's Kingdom. Their belief that they could control their own eternity by works blinded and deafened them to the simple message of salvation.

Look at vv. 17 and 18. Again Jesus emphasizes that the wall of sin which would crumble down on them was made of unbelief – they would not allow the convicting power of the Holy Spirit to penetrate their heart. They continued to reject the offer of eternal life. Look how Jesus responded to His critics before they even criticized Him. He said that His purpose in leaving Heaven was not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

Illustration: [Share these examples of people rejecting Christ or share some of your own experiences with seeing people turn their back on Jesus] I sat down beside a man on an airplane a few years ago. I had just finished preaching at a weeklong youth camp. Before the plane took off I asked him if he had ever met Jesus Christ. He reached down, unfastened his seat belt, said "I don't have time for this" and asked the stewardess to seat him somewhere else. Last week at the beach I began to share

Christ with a man; as I was talking he got on his bicycle and rode away. Unless those men and millions like them answer “Yes” to life’s most important question, they will spend eternity in Hell. By walking away they shut the door to the blowing wind of the Holy Spirit; by walking away they said that life’s most important question is too uncomfortable to face. Don’t walk away today – don’t be counted in the number of people who will spend eternity in Hell. Say Yes to life’s most important question. Yes, I want to repent of my sin and be born again and enter God’s glorious Kingdom.

Application: Some of you have allowed the years of rejection and insecurities to build walls. Don’t allow those walls to keep you out of Heaven. Ask: Which side of the line are you standing on? You say, well, I’m kind of in the middle right now. Realize, you can’t put one foot in Heaven and one in Hell; they are too far apart. You are either standing on the side of the Savior or the side of Satan; which is it? Will you cross the line this morning, come over to Jesus’ side while there is time, come to the side where there is confidence in a glorious future? Don’t be like those men I talked to and they walked away. You know the picture I got when they walked away. It was a picture of a person leaving the openness and beauty of the ocean shore to go to a prison cell. To walk away, to allow your heart to remain hard is entering a prison cell waiting on death row – already condemned, already sentenced to eternal death. You can receive a Heavenly Pardon today by saying yes to life’s most important question.

Ask and Discuss: Draw a line down the middle of the board in your room. On one side write “We” and on the other “Ye.” Ask people in your class to do the same thing on a piece of paper.
Ask: Write your name on the side that you have chosen to stand. Lead in an opportunity for those on the “Ye” side to pray and trust Christ as Savior.

Extra Exegetical Notes

V. 9 Nicodemus’ greatest hindrance to belief and understanding was pride. Remember his statement in verse 2, “we know.” He came to Jesus assuming he already had all the answers and already possessed salvation and the assurance of eternity. His spiritual pride blinded him from seeing the truth of Spirit birth. **V. 10** Nicodemus knew rules, regulations, and religious expectations, but he did not know Revelation. He is a glaring example of the dangers of a closed Bible. **V. 11** Man’s unbelief in no way diminishes God’s truth. Man may boldly profess to know, but with a closed Bible he cannot know that which God has always known and chose in time to reveal in His Word. **V. 12** The new birth occurs on earth. This is the earthly thing to which Jesus refers. He would not reveal to Nicodemus the great doctrines that at this time still remained in the heart of God, if Nicodemus would not grasp the elementary or first truth, namely “you must be born again.” The elementary point must be understood before any other Kingdom discussion can occur.

III. The Quantity of Life (vv. 13-14)

Explanation: In v. 13 Jesus demonstrates that He was the only one who had the power of Salvation. He could speak with authority about heavenly places because heaven was His home. But Nicodemus must have still had a question: “What does it

take for a man to enter into God's perfect Kingdom?" In v. 14 Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is only through Jesus giving all of Himself as a sacrifice could Nicodemus enter His glorious Kingdom. It took the total of Christ's life to save us. For Nicodemus, a Pharisee and well educated in the law, Jesus gives an illustration using Moses' lifting up the serpent. It was the last miracle through Moses on the borders of the Promise Land. The sinning people had been bitten by fiery serpents and were dying without hope.

Moses was commanded to make a brazen serpent and hang it on a pole. After he had lifted it up, all a bitten Israelite had to do to be healed was to look and live. The look demonstrated their belief, their faith in its saving power. Jesus said in like fashion, "I must be lifted up." This lifted up was not a testimony; it was not a touchy feely song. When Christ said, "I must be lifted up," He was pointing the way to the cross of Calvary where He would be lifted up in open humiliation. Today, just as those Israelites looked to the brazen serpent to remove the sting of venom from their bodies, we can look back to the cross in faith, and through the shed blood of Christ the sting of death can finally be removed from our lives. What did it take for us to have access to the Kingdom of God? It took all of Jesus being lifted up to pay our price.

Extra Exegetical Notes

V. 13 He is demonstrating the authority and sufficiency of His witness. The One who came from Heaven is the only One that can make known the truth of how others can go to Heaven. The One who came from Heaven is the only One who can, with the Triune Godhead, say, "We know." **V. 14** Numbers 21:9ff; As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness and the people who looked and lived, so too must Jesus be lifted up on a cross. The very thing that was killing the Israelites, the snakes, would be lifted up, and they would be saved from physical death. In like fashion, the very thing that was separating all men from God, their sinful flesh, would be lifted up on a cross since the Word of God became flesh (John 1:14), and all that looked to Him in faith would be saved from eternal death.

IV. The Quality of Life (vv. 15-16)

Explanation: These two verses are without a doubt the most quoted in all of scripture. We see particularly verse 16 on bumper stickers and signs at sporting events. Sadly, although millions know the zip code of this verse, the message is not known by but a few. There are two aspects of John 3:16. The first is that of God in giving His Son; the second is that of our accepting Christ as Savior. Imagine the love of a Father in giving up His only Son to die for people who would rebel against Him. It would be as if we were to go to our nursery, pick up the smallest helpless infant out of the safety of our nursery staff, carry that precious gift to the local penitentiary, place her in the cell block which housed all the child molesters, and say do with her what you will and after that you can go free. Our loving heavenly Father sent His Son Jesus who willingly came. The Father said do with Him what you will, even put Him to death and when you're tired of your sin filled life, We will be waiting to give you eternal life. This everlasting life is utterly different than death. It is not only a life that lasts forever, it is the highest quality of life imaginable. **Ask:** do you realize when you say yes to life's most important question that you inherit eternal life? I talked with a lady several months ago. I shared with her about eternal life and she responded with "my life is miserable, why would I want this forever?"

Eternal life is not a continuation of your present condition: it is a graduation into a glorious celebration. In eternity there are no tears or sorrow, only perfect peace in God's presence.

But there is an issue in this pinnacle of scripture that we have missed. Jesus said whosoever believes. "Whosoever" means any one who trusts in Christ for salvation will have everlasting life. It is a believer's mandate in the heart of God's message of salvation. Since the salvation of Christ is for all people, shouldn't we as a church be spreading the message to all people?

Illustration: Many years ago Joey was living a rough life. He was involved in drugs and had a terrible reputation in a small South Carolina town. He got to that point in life where he was tired of sin; he was tired of temporary satisfaction which left him totally empty. So he went to one of the churches in town where much of his family attended. He was a "whosoever" reaching for an answer to his emptiness. Because of his bad reputation some of the leaders thought he might be a bad influence on some of "their" teenagers so they turned him away. A greater tragedy was that standing in the wings was the local Mormon cult that welcomed him with open arms. Today Joey is a successful businessman with a wonderful family, all of whom are greatly devoted to the lie of Mormonism. He is a millionaire who instead of investing money in the gospel being spread throughout the world is investing money in the perpetuation of a lie.

Application: First Baptist, we had better learn quickly that this is not a black gospel, it is not a white gospel, it is not a Hispanic gospel, it is not a middle class or lower class gospel. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which says whosoever believeth, shall be saved. In Christ there is no such thing as a white church and a black church. There is only a church obedient or a church disobedient to the call to spread the gospel and send others to the masses. May it never again be said of FBC that it's the white church, that it's the upper middle class church, or that's the popular people's youth group. May we stand as a church whose testimony reads "a Church that is filled with whosoever." Are you committed to reaching whosoever? Eternal life is not racially nor economically divided and neither should we be. The mental lines that divide White Jacksonville from Black Jacksonville are walls that have been created by the sin of men. I don't know about you, but my heart tells me it's time to take the Gospel, tear those walls down and say Christ was lifted up for you just as much as He was for me. The quality of eternal life is too precious a treasure to keep to ourselves.

Extra Exegetical Notes

V. 15 "whoever": This was another radical concept for Nicodemus. The entire text tears apart all the beliefs that Nicodemus and the rest of the Jews held regarding salvation. They believed that salvation was only for the elect of Israel. But here Jesus introduces the "whoever" offer of salvation. "believes": The word carries the idea of

transferring ownership from one to another. Salvation is not mere assent to certain truths, but also fully surrendering one's life to Christ as Master and Lord. "perish": To continue in the state of perishing. Since all people are born dead in their trespasses and sins, here Jesus states that the one remedy to all mankind's problem of death is to willfully put their belief in Christ alone for salvation. "eternal life": it is to possess now what will endure forever; it is to possess what one formerly had no part of. Nicodemus as a part of the chosen children of Israel had no part in eternal life by his physical birth; it would only be through the new birth that Nicodemus and whoever believed would possess eternal life in Christ.

Making It Personal

A Plan for Sharing the Gospel - John 3:16

We will take a unique look at John 3:16 by examining five word pairs in the verse. It is perhaps the most known verse in the entire Bible, but also perhaps the most misunderstood. These word pairs serve as a pathway on which we can walk unbelievers as we show them the good news that Jesus presented to Nicodemus.

[Encourage your class to share John 3:16 with a lost person this week. Make a commitment before your class that you will share John 3:16 with a lost person this week and offer that person an opportunity to trust Christ as Lord and Savior.]

God and Son: The Giver and the Gift

There are two necessary components of a gift exchange: A Giver and a Gift

- a. Romans 6:23
- b. **Ask:** What are two requirements in order for a gift to be exchanged? Note that there must be a giver and a gift.
- c. **Ask:** Why do we call God the Giver? Because verse 16 says that He gave.
- d. **Ask:** Why do we call Jesus the Gift? Because verse 16 says that God gave Him and He is the one who alone can give us eternal life.

Loved and Gave: Prerequisite and Proof

The Son's mission was a result of the Father's love. We do not ask when receiving a present, "What did I do to deserve this?" God is not to be admired because the world is so big, but so bad.

- a. Romans 5:8
- b. **Ask:** What was the only condition of this gift being given? Note that it was only God's love that determined if the gift would be given.
- c. **Ask:** What was the proof that God loved us? Note that He demonstrated His love by giving His Son so that we might have life.

World and Whosoever: Without Distinction and Individual

"He invites all men without exception to the faith of Christ" (John Calvin). "God invites all indiscriminately to partake of life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers" (John Calvin). "World is again repeated [in v. 17], that no man may think himself wholly Excluded" (John Calvin).

- a. John 3:7
- b. **Ask:** Why was Nicodemus wrong in assuming that salvation was only for the Jews? Note that because verse 16 says that God's offer was to the entire world.
- c. **Ask:** According to verse 16 can people go to heaven just because they are Jewish; or a member of a church or in a Christian family? Note that the "whosoever" puts the responsibility of repentance on each individual and that only those individuals with a personal relationship with Christ will go to heaven.

Believes and Have: Trust and Transfer

Not easy believism; Trust = Full Weight

- a. Romans 10:9-13
- b. **Ask:** How do you know that I trust this chair in which I am sitting? Note that you put the entire weight of your body in that chair.
- c. **Ask:** What does "**believes in Him**" mean in light of this definition of trust? Note that it means we trust Jesus with all our forgiveness, for eternal life, and not our own works or efforts. Note: When we put our trust in Christ we will have a place assured us in Heaven.

Perish and Life: Unalterable Death and Unending Life

We simply do not live like people go to Hell.

- a. Ephesians 2:3-5
- b. **Ask:** What is the opposite of living? Dying
- c. Note the word "**perish.**" It implies, not a final act that ends, but a never ending state of death. In other words, those who do not believe will forever die in Hell.
- d. **Ask:** What is the great promise of God in verse 16? Note that eternal life is given to all who put all their trust in Jesus.
- e. **Conclusion:** Ask small group leaders to share when they put their total trust in Christ and received the greatest gift of eternal life. If a group member has not done so, share from John 3:16 how they can be forgiven and receive eternal life.

Review

Exhort your class to take the gospel more seriously in 2010. Challenge your hearers to return next week ready to share testimonies of where and with whom they shared the good news of salvation with over the week.

Memory Verse

Encourage your class to memorize John 3:16-17.