



# INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

READING JOHN'S GOSPEL

**SESSION 9:  
THE DECEPTION OF  
HERITAGE AND RELIGION**

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# **THE DECEPTION OF HERITAGE AND RELIGION**

## **SESSION 9**

### **SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. The name Nicodemus means “victorious.” How could Nicodemus’ victories in life blind him?
2. As the “teacher of Israel,” what had Nicodemus profoundly failed in? How do you think he took Jesus’ rebuke of his ignorance? Consider the age and “accomplishment” discrepancy between Jesus and Nicodemus.
3. What victories in life blind you to Jesus?
4. What “evil deeds” do you think Nicodemus loved? What “evil deeds” do you love that keep you in the darkness?
5. How does the gospel shed light on the darkness of our lives, reveal our “dark loves,” and bring us life?

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

The Beloved Disciple continues to demonstrate the weaknesses of religion. The miracle at Cana demonstrated the inadequacy of religion to purify and that its ability to provide an abundant life was lacking compared to Jesus' power to abundantly bless. The cleansing of the temple of moneychangers and vendors demonstrated the true motivations of Israel and that the physical temple and the memorial of Passover were surpassed by Jesus in His ability to atone for sin and provide access to God. In this passage, Jesus is going to come face to face with a real person, not jars, temples, or holidays. In this, the first of a series of dialogs Jesus has with real people from varied backgrounds, we will see Jesus' skill in addressing the true needs people have. We will see Jesus' skill in addressing the true needs we have.

## STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

### Read the Passage:

John 3:1-21

Numbers 21:4-9

### Think Through the Questions:

1. Why is it significant that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the people?
2. Why does John point out that Nicodemus came "by night?"
3. Explain what "born again" means.
4. Why do you think it was so difficult for Nicodemus to understand what Jesus was saying?
5. What is the point of Jesus use of Numbers 21:4-9?

### Respond to the Questions Below:

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## COMMENTARY

The first two verses of this passage give us telling information about Nicodemus that helps us understand the purpose of this passage. The first thing we know is that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Pharisees were powerful Jewish religious leaders and teachers in Jesus day. They promoted and enforced laws in addition to the Law of Moses. These laws and other customs heavily burdened the Jewish people and continually emphasized the Pharisee's power and status over and above those of the common people. John also indicates that Nicodemus was "a ruler of the Jews," which meant that he possessed a role in governing the nation of Israel. The third piece of information about Nicodemus is that he "came to Jesus by night." This could simply be a comment on the time of day, but *darkness*, *light*, *night*, and *day* are theological terms pregnant with meaning in John's writings. John associates darkness and night with spiritual deadness, deception, and blindness. He associates light and day with life, truth, and clarity (John 1:1-18). Additionally, in coming by night, Nicodemus avoids others seeing him. Why is he secretly trying to see Jesus? Before Jesus or Nicodemus say anything, we can already begin putting together a caricature of Nicodemus. Although Nicodemus is a Jewish civic and religious leader, John is hinting that Nicodemus may be deceptive or the victim of deception, which are poor qualities of any type of leader. But even with these potential problems, Nicodemus is coming to Jesus the light. That can only be a good thing.

Nicodemus speaks first and says two things. First, Nicodemus represents a group in his use of "we," and the group is most likely the other Jewish religious and civic leaders. Nicodemus may be speaking for the collective or he may be hiding in the security of these groups. Second, Nicodemus begins to engage Jesus as one of his own, a fellow teacher, and acknowledges that Jesus must indeed be from God. Has he made these statements so Jesus would warm up to him? Has he made these statements to flatter Jesus so Jesus would entrust himself to Nicodemus? It's hard to say for sure, but Jesus, who is ever so aware of the spiritual conditions of the people he is speaking to, doesn't play Nicodemus' games. Instead, Jesus raises the concern Nicodemus most needs to consider. Jesus' reply, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," catches Nicodemus off guard. Nicodemus is thinking that Jesus is speaking of a literal re-birth, which would indeed make Jesus appear to be crazy. Jesus clarifies that one must be born of water

and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. While scholars for centuries have argued about the meaning of “water” in this passage, the text itself tells the nature of this “water.” To this point, we know that John the Baptizer has been baptizing people in water and that Jesus baptizes in the Spirit (1:19-34). John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance—he was preparing people for Jesus so that when Jesus came, they would follow him. To be “born of water” is to be baptized into John’s baptism, which means that you have acknowledged the future coming of the Son of God and have prepared yourself for him. To be “born of Spirit” is to be born of God (1:13) through the Spirit of God by believing in the name of Jesus. Jesus is simply stating that one must repent of one’s sins and believe in Him, who is the Son of God. To do these things is to be born of water and Spirit.

Nicodemus replies, “How can these things be?” Nicodemus was surprised because his trust had been in his original birth—his birth into the nation of Israel, the children of Abraham, and the nation of Moses. Nicodemus was putting his trust in his family heritage, and although significant and privileged as the chosen nation of God, this family identity did not guarantee citizenship into the kingdom of God. Jesus replies to him, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” To Jesus, these ideas should be well known to Israel and especially its teachers. The Jewish Scriptures, known as the Law, Prophets, and Writings, spoke of the coming anointed Son of God (Genesis 3:15, 2 Samuel 7:11-16, Psalm 2, and others) and of God putting His Spirit into them (Deuteronomy 30:1-10, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:22-32; 37:1-14, and others). Why was Nicodemus in such “darkness” about such an important matter—citizenship in the kingdom of God? Why was he so blinded by his family and religious heritage?

Jesus continues, but now Jesus begins using plural nouns and brings “his people” into the mix and places Nicodemus with “his people.” Jesus states that “we,” referring at least to himself and John the Baptizer, “speak of things that we know for sure and have seen,” but Nicodemus and his people, who are the Jewish religious and civic leaders, do not receive the testimony of Jesus and John, even though it is revealed in the Jewish Scriptures. If they do not believe Jesus in the most foundational things—things that are even revealed in their own texts, how could Jesus expect them to believe anything else? His concluding statement comes back around to his original point—belief in Jesus,

who baptizes in the Spirit, is the means to citizenship in the kingdom of God, which is eternal life (v.15). In this statement, Jesus draws upon an historical event in the nation of Israel. During their time under Moses, God disciplined Israel repeatedly for their ongoing disbelief, grumbling, idolatry, and immorality. On one occasion, God sent serpents to torment Israel. Moses confessed the sin of Israel to God and asked God to remove the serpents. God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and to place it on a pole for all to see. Anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the serpent on the pole and be saved from dying. Jesus' use of this historical event communicates several things that he will continue to explain as the passage continues. First, those who are bitten must have the faith to believe that looking at the snake will save them. Second, they must look at the snake. Those who seek eternal life in the kingdom of God must believe that Jesus is the means to that life and believe in him for it. And as only those who looked at the snake were saved, only those who look to Jesus will be saved. Being a part of Israel did not guarantee salvation in either instance.

The rest of the passage begins with one of the most familiar verses in all of the Bible and is the core message of the gospel. It is John 3:16.

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

Belief in Jesus is essential to eternal life—citizenship in the kingdom of God. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. The world stands condemned already because of their evil deeds, including Israel. The only way out of condemnation is by believing in the name of the only Son of God, Jesus Christ. Their judgment and condemnation come from rejecting the light, which is the Word of God (John 1:1-18), which is Jesus Christ. People reject the light because they love the darkness. What is darkness? Darkness is deception. Darkness is keeping things hidden. Darkness is remaining unexposed. Why do people deceive, keep things hidden, and remain unexposed? They remain hidden because they love their evil deeds. If their evil deeds were exposed, they would have to admit them before everyone, including God. And in this statement, Jesus comes full circle with Nicodemus. Remember, Nicodemus came in the darkness of night. What was he hiding? What evil deeds was Nicodemus hiding? Who was he hiding them from? What was he embarrassed about? We don't know, but

Jesus did. Rather than get engaged in flattery session, Jesus immediately went to Nicodemus' weakness—his unexposed evil deeds. Most likely, Nicodemus' evil deeds had something to do with the love he had for his status and position. Jesus was trying to pry open the hard shell of Nicodemus' hidden loves and it took him by surprise.

But in all of this, there is something about Jesus that draws Nicodemus to come out of the darkness and into the light. Earlier, Nicodemus indicated that Jesus signs convinced him that Jesus was from God. Despite Nicodemus' love for his privileged position, Nicodemus sought after Jesus and allowed Jesus to expose him. We shall continue to see Nicodemus' process to come to the light throughout the rest of John's Gospel. In this process, we will see how Jesus worked to cleanse Nicodemus of his evil deeds, so that it will be seen clearly that God was at work in the life of Nicodemus (3:21).

Not only has Jesus exposed Nicodemus, but Jesus has also exposed more of the weaknesses and failures of Judaism at the time of Jesus. In the wedding celebration, Jesus revealed his supremacy over the Mosaic Law through his life-giving purification from sin and evil through his wine—his blood to be shed in the coming hour. In the temple, Jesus revealed that he was the Passover lamb through which, upon his hour of death and resurrection, would provide complete access to God in ways the lambs and temples of the past could never do. With Nicodemus, Jesus reveals that the Jewish leaders are ignorant of the basic teachings of the Scriptures. They have missed Jesus and are incapable of leading the nation of Israel because of their love for their national identity and the glory of their religious and civic positions.

At this point, John's message is quite clear. Jesus is the point of the Mosaic Law, Passover, the temple, and the national identity of Israel. Belief in Jesus is the means to eternal life and entry into the kingdom of God. The nation of Israel had grown so stagnant in their religious identity and the accompanying rituals and festivals that they had completely missed the point of these things entirely. Without Jesus, religion and family identity provide a mask to hide behind and a means through which people are able to hide their evil deeds. Religion and family identity enable people to be cowards and not face up to their sins and shortcomings. Religion and family identity deceive people to believe that they have found the light. Jesus breaks into our lives, reveals the weaknesses of what we hide behind, and invites us to find security and confidence in Him.

# THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES

The story of Nicodemus is one for all of us. We can read this story and react with surprise at the ignorance or blindness of Nicodemus and the religious leaders and yet fail to see how we are so much like them. They were simply people trying to get by in the world, trying to find some satisfaction and meaning in their lives, no different from us. They were people that hid in their family heritage. They were people that hid in their powerful positions. They were people that hid in their money and status and possessions. They were people that hid in their knowledge and accomplishments. They were people that hid in their religious knowledge and devotion. In all this hiding, they were covering their evil deeds and true selves. They were too cowardly to expose them and address them head on. Maybe they were trying to fix their problems themselves and used these other things to make them feel better about themselves. Maybe they were simply ignoring their evil deeds. Maybe they really loved their evil deeds and didn't want to stop doing them. Are we any better than they?

## Issue: Coming into Jesus' Light

1. How would we know if we were being deceived by our trust in our family or religious heritage?
2. Why must we be "born again?"
3. Have you been born again? How does your life reflect a new birth and God's activity?
4. What role do you think Christian community plays in helping us stay "in the light" and exposed to Jesus?

## Respond to the Questions Below:

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# DINNER TABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

## MEAL #1: NICODEMUS

Read John 3:1-15 and discuss.

**Definition: Nicodemus**--victorious

1. In what ways do you think Nicodemus was victorious?
2. What did Nicodemus' victories blind him to?
3. In what ways did Nicodemus neglect his responsibilities?
4. Why do you think he neglected these responsibilities?

## MEAL #2: BORN AGAIN

Read John 3:1-15 and discuss these questions with your family.

1. What do you think it means to be “born again?” Why does Jesus use this image of rebirth?
2. Ask each person in the family if they are “born again?”

## MEAL #3: THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS

1. Why did God send the snakes to Israel?
2. What did Moses include in his prayers?
3. What did people have to do to be healed from a snake bite?
4. Were all people saved that got bit by snakes?
5. What do people have to do to be in the kingdom of God and have eternal life?

## MEAL #4: JOHN 3:16

Read John 3:16 and have each family member memorize it.

# FAMILY PRAYERS

# SERMON NOTES

