

## COVENANT — JESUS CHRIST

### *A Conversation with Nicodemus*

#### **LESSON 01**

**MARCH 08, 2026**

#### ***LESSON TEXT***

John 3:1–21

#### ***FOCUS VERSES***

John 3:14–15

**<sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:**

**<sup>15</sup>That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.**

#### ***TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT***

This new covenant calls us to new life through water baptism and Spirit baptism.

#### ***MY RESPONSE TO COVENANT***

I will be born again and live as a new creature in Christ.

#### ***COVENANT CONTEXT***

Not long after Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He met with an elite religious leader named Nicodemus and introduced the new covenant to him. Despite humanity's constant rebellion, God still wanted to be in covenant with us, and He was revealing what that new covenant would look like: born of water and born of the Spirit. Thankfully God is still inviting us to be born again.

#### ***TEACHING OUTLINE***

**Icebreaker:** Share a story about a time you misunderstood what someone else was asking you and it led to a few laughs.

**Teacher Tip:** Connect the group's answers to Nicodemus misunderstanding Jesus when Jesus taught him to be born again.

**Lesson Connection:** Share the Lesson Connection. **(I)**

##### **I. WHO WAS NICODEMUS?**

- A. Nicodemus Was a Ruler of the Jews
- B. Nicodemus Recognized Jesus' Miracles

***DISCUSS:*** *If you were Nicodemus, how would you have opened up a conversation with Jesus?*

- C. I will submit my preconceptions to God's Word. **(V)**

**DISCUSS:** *What preconception has God ever overturned that you had about Him?*

## II. WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?

- A. You Must Be Born Again
- B. The Bronze Serpent Saved Israel from Destruction

**DISCUSS:** *Considering how the Jews revered Moses, why do you think Jesus drew a connection between Himself and Moses while talking to Nicodemus?*

- C. I will be born again through the gospel.

**DISCUSS:** *If you have experienced the new birth, how has it changed your life?*

## III. OUT OF DARKNESS, INTO LIGHT

- A. Nicodemus Defended Jesus to the Sanhedrin

**DISCUSS:** *If you have you ever been belittled for taking a stand for Jesus, how did you respond?*

- B. Nicodemus Helped Bury the Body of Jesus
- C. I will be willing to upend my life to follow Jesus.

### **Internalizing the Message**

#### **PRAYER FOCUS**

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- To be born again and walk in newness of life
- For God to help us testify to others about this new-birth experience

#### **LESSON CONNECTION (I)**

Charles Mahaney was a powerhouse preacher who evangelized and ministered across the United States and the world. He was known for his intense desire to see souls brought into the kingdom of God. Every soul mattered to him. He was so committed to seeing the gospel preached to every man and woman that he ministered in countless prisons across the nation, bringing the message of salvation to those whom society rejects the most. Mahaney's sharp sense of humor and deep knowledge of the Bible had his audiences in tears of laughter one minute and tears of travail the next. His unique ministry touched many lives, bringing men and women to God.

However, his story did not always look like this. He came from meager beginnings and did not have the support of a church family. Instead, young Charlie had already been exposed to drugs before the age of ten. Unsurprisingly, his life did not improve as he grew older; he only fell deeper into this sinful lifestyle. Struggling with addictions and consistently participating in illegal activities, Charlie must have seemed like a hopeless case to those around him. Some might have wondered, *When you are that far away from God, how can there be any hope for you?*

Thankfully, God does not view people's situations the way humanity views them. While few might have believed it was possible, God was able to work on Charlie's heart. God allowed Charlie to become connected with a minister who disciplined him and taught him the truth of God's Word. Charlie's full conversion took some time, but God continued to work on his heart. Everything changed for Charlie Mahaney in 1966 when he finally experienced the power of Spirit baptism and water baptism in Jesus' name. Quickly he and others began to notice a change.

Before long, Charlie was a preacher. For many years he had lived for himself, but after his experience with God, he felt brand new. He left his sinful life behind and wholeheartedly embraced the call of God on his life. What others likely doubted was possible had become reality because God looked past the filth of sin that stained Charlie's life and gave him the opportunity to become a new creature. He accepted the opportunity and he never looked back.

The story of Charles Mahaney is unique, yet it is not the only example of a life that has been changed by God's power. Every day God impacts the lives of men and women across the globe, inviting them into covenant with Him. Many times those who seem the furthest from God find their way into His presence because deep within they have a longing for the things of God. Men like Charles Mahaney and even the apostle Paul, who once set out to murder Christians and destroy their faith, stand as testimonies that the new-birth experience is for everyone, if only they are willing to respond in faith-filled obedience (adapted from oof.upci.org, "Charles D. 'Charlie' Mahaney").

## ***BIBLE LESSON***

### **I. WHO WAS NICODEMUS?**

#### **A. Nicodemus Was a Ruler of the Jews**

John 3 introduces readers to Nicodemus, telling us he was a Pharisee. However, Nicodemus was not just any Pharisee; he was a ruler, or leader, of the Jews (John 3:1). It seems strange to see a respected religious leader slinking about in the darkness, yet that is exactly where we find Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was not only walking in *physical* darkness but also in *spiritual* darkness. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus had spent many hours studying the Law, but his intense study still did not prepare him for the message Jesus brought. However, unlike many other Pharisees, Nicodemus wished to learn more of what Jesus taught. Nicodemus's hunger for truth caused him to risk his reputation among the religious elite of his day.

#### **B. Nicodemus Recognized Jesus' Miracles**

When he began to speak to Jesus, Nicodemus immediately pointed out Jesus' miracles and acknowledged that Jesus had clearly come from God. Nicodemus had seen the miracles Jesus was performing and recognized they could not have been done without the power of God. Perhaps in the back of his mind Nicodemus was questioning how Jesus could perform miracles while the Pharisees could not. It must have seemed strange to him that he and his fellow Pharisees, who so heavily emphasized exact obedience to the letter of the Law, were not able to perform miracles like this. Nicodemus may have wondered, *What could be so different between us and this Jesus?*

Nicodemus lived his life devoted to keeping every letter of the old covenant, but he did not see the radical change Jesus had come to make. Jesus came to fulfill the Law of the old covenant and to institute His new covenant based on the gospel. First John 4:16 declares: "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." The new covenant of love Jesus was instituting would give a new opportunity to all people to have the Spirit of God living inside of them and for them to experience the peace and joy that come from covenant relationship with Him.

***DISCUSS:*** *If you were Nicodemus, how would you have opened up a conversation with Jesus?*

#### **C. I will submit my preconceptions to God's Word.**

Nicodemus came to Jesus with preconceptions about what it meant to live for God. We are not much different. Often we come before God with our own preconceived ideas. We try to fit God within the confines of what our human minds can comprehend, but God does not fit within our confines. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God said: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,...For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways” (Isaiah 55:8–9). We should not expect God to behave exactly as we think He should. Instead, we should study His Word and submit ourselves to it.

(V) The ways of God often exceed our expectations, but sometimes they look quite different from what we would expect. In those times when God’s ways look so different from ours, trust He knows exactly what He is doing. While Nicodemus clearly could not yet fathom the gravity of what Jesus had come to do, he did have the opportunity to decide whether he would hold fast to his preconceived notions or embrace this new and unexpected work God was carrying out. In the same way, God will repeatedly extend to us opportunities to trust Him, even when He is turning our deeply held preconceptions entirely upside down.

*DISCUSS: What preconception has God ever overturned that you had about Him?*

## **II. WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?**

### **A. You Must Be Born Again**

After Nicodemus proclaimed what he knew in John 3:2, Jesus began to demonstrate just how little Nicodemus actually knew. Jesus responded to Nicodemus: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus’ statement perplexed Nicodemus. *How could a man be born again?* Nicodemus asked the obvious: “Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:4). Nicodemus’s understandable confusion illustrates he was clearly missing the point of what Jesus was trying to say.

Jesus explained further to Nicodemus that a man must be “born of water and of the Spirit” (John 3:5). Without this new-birth experience, no one would be able to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus was introducing the way anyone who believes on Him can enter a new covenant and new life with Him. Jesus was clear that this new birth of water and Spirit was the only way to enter into this covenant.

### **B. The Bronze Serpent Saved Israel from Destruction**

When Jesus finished explaining this new-birth experience, Nicodemus was still confused. He asked: “How can these things be?” Though Nicodemus was one of the greatest teachers of the Law, he still could not comprehend what Jesus was trying to teach him. Jesus began to speak of Moses, the man God chose to give the old covenant to the Hebrews during their Exodus from Egypt. Jesus reminded Nicodemus of how Moses “lifted up the serpent in the wilderness” (John 3:14). This reference pointed back to a story of God extending forgiveness to His people.

While Israel wandered, they began to complain against God and Moses. In response God dispatched fiery serpents that wreaked havoc in the Israelite camp (Numbers 21:6). However, when Moses prayed for the people, God commanded him to make a brass serpent and lift it on a pole above the people. When the people looked upon the serpent, God mercifully spared their lives.

Of the many Old Testament passages, Jesus intentionally chose to reference this one, for the day would come when “the Son of man would be lifted up” (John 3:14). Jesus was foreshadowing the day when He would be lifted up on a cross to bring life and healing to all humanity. When that day came, all who believed on Him would be able to experience everlasting life by entering into the new-birth covenant with Him (John 3:15–16).

***DISCUSS:** Considering how the Jews revered Moses, why do you think Jesus drew a connection between Himself and Moses while talking to Nicodemus?*

### **C. I will be born again through the gospel.**

Jesus’ invitation to experience new birth still extends to us today. When we are spiritually dying in our sin, Jesus invites us to look up, behold Him, and believe on Him and the power of His sacrifice on the cross. As we believe on Him, we then act in obedience to God’s Word and experience the wonder of being born again of the water and the Spirit. As we go down into the waters of baptism with repentant hearts, Jesus’ sacrifice pays our debt of sin. As we are filled with the Holy Ghost, we rise into newness of life and discover the mercy, grace, and joy that come with entering into a holy covenant with Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ imagery of being born again has such beauty. Although we were first born into sin, we can be born again into righteousness. After our new birth, sin no longer has dominion over our lives. (See Romans 6:14.) In II Corinthians 5, Paul wrote that “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” The new birth gives us a clean page, allowing God to write a new chapter in our lives. Past sins, regrets, and doubts can fade behind us as we embark on a brand-new life empowered by the Spirit.

***DISCUSS:** If you have experienced the new birth, how has it changed your life?*

## **III. OUT OF DARKNESS, INTO LIGHT**

### **A. Nicodemus Defended Jesus to the Sanhedrin**

It would be wonderful if the Gospel writer John had recorded Nicodemus’s response, but he didn’t. But we are certain Nicodemus pondered these words and they began to take root in his heart. In John 7, when many of the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin wanted to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus stepped forward to defend Him. (See John 7:45–51.) Nicodemus, who had evidently retreated back into the shadows after his undercover conversation with Jesus, began to take his first steps toward the light. As Jesus’ opponents began to accuse Him of violating the Law, Nicodemus made his own appeal to the Law by pointing out the Law afforded Jesus the right to have a formal hearing.

Nicodemus did not outright side with Jesus publicly, but he was leaning toward Him more than most of his Pharisee friends. This decision proved to be risky for Nicodemus. The Pharisees who opposed Jesus began to openly mock Nicodemus for his stand. Ironically, these same Pharisees who claimed to want nothing more than to uphold the Law were belittling Nicodemus, an esteemed rabbi, for reminding them exactly what the Law said. Nicodemus, who once came to Jesus under the cover of night for fear of being seen, began to place his reputation and position among the religious elite at risk.

***DISCUSS:** If you have you ever been belittled for taking a stand for Jesus, how did you respond?*

### **B. Nicodemus Helped Bury the Body of Jesus**

After taking his stand in John 7, Nicodemus disappeared from Scripture's story once again. When he reappeared, a total change had taken place in him. The next time he appeared, he was alongside Joseph of Arimathea at the foot of the cross. As Joseph prepared to bury Jesus, Nicodemus came also, bearing "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight" for Jesus' burial (John 19:39–40). Nicodemus had seen the Son of man lifted up, just as Jesus had prophesied in John 3:14, and Nicodemus believed. He was fully, publicly stepping out of darkness into the light. Nicodemus, a Pharisee of high station, personally assisted in the burial of Jesus. By his actions, he was beginning to declare himself as a disciple of Jesus.

Surely this act of love for Jesus must have angered many of the religious leaders. How could a man of the Law personally assist in the burial of one put to death for violating the Law? Nicodemus had likely spent his entire life building his reputation as he studied the Law and skillfully taught it to others. Yet he refused to remain in the shadows any longer, placing everything on the line just to follow Jesus.

### **C. I will be willing to upend my life to follow Jesus.**

As we pursue our own covenant relationship with Jesus, we should draw strength from the passionate and selfless commitment Nicodemus made to Jesus the day of the Crucifixion. Regardless of the cost of the sacrifice, following Jesus is always worth it. Following Jesus is never without resistance and it often comes with persecution. Some may mock us, like many of the Pharisees mocked Nicodemus. However, when we enter into covenant with Jesus and experience the new birth He purchased for us on the cross, we will find joy and satisfaction the world can never give and the world can never take away.

***Teacher Option:** Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how one person being born again affects so many others. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.*

### ***INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE***

In the early 2000s, Robby, a talented singer and guitarist, was beginning to make an impact on the blues scene of Tennessee's famed Beale Street in Memphis. Robby's talent was turning heads and he knew it. He had no shortage of gigs at the blues clubs, and to those around him, it seemed Robby had a lifelong career ahead of him. But he was lost and dying in a sinful lifestyle that could only lead to destruction. Little did he know that his life would soon change.

Robby's mother attended a local Pentecostal church that was holding revival services. The church family canvassed the area, going door-to-door, inviting neighbors to the revival. The congregation prayed and worked as hard as they could to invite as many as possible from the community to these services. Someone convinced Robby to visit.

He slipped into the back of the church and listened as the minister began to preach. For most of the service, Robby was unmoved. He continued to sit in the back; it seemed unlikely to anyone watching that the preacher's words

would get through to him. However, as the minister brought his message to a close, the Holy Ghost began to move. Robby would later testify he heard an audible voice that day saying, "If you walk out the doors of this church, you will never come back." In a moment, his demeanor changed. He quickly made his way to the altar. That day Robby was filled with the Holy Ghost.

As it turned out, Robby was the only soul who was saved as a result of those revival services that week. It may seem the results were underwhelming considering the amount of effort the church put into inviting the community to those services, but Robby was a soul worth saving. For the rest of his life, he remained faithful to church. He did not play blues in the clubs anymore, but he brought his unique talents into the church and was a committed member of the worship team for years. He married a wonderful, Spirit-filled lady, and together they taught the junior high Sunday school class, directly impacting many lives. For the rest of his life, Robby stood as a shining example of what it truly means to be born again.

The guest minister for the revival services the night Robby was filled with the Holy Ghost was Charles Mahaney (whom we met in the Lesson Connection). The commitment the addict-turned-evangelist made to God many years before would eventually trickle down and affect the life of Robby and countless others.

Our new-birth experience must not end with us. We should begin to invite others to experience it for themselves. When we are born again, we have the opportunity to share the gospel with others and disciple them into followers of Jesus Christ. Then together we can choose to embrace our lives as new creatures in Christ. Doing so, we build the kingdom of God and experience what it truly means to be and to live born again.