



Believe

JOHN

MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: John 3:13-21

1. A Clarifying Word about 'Water & Spirit' (3:5)

- a. "...unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."..."unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (Jn. 3:3, 5)
- b. Criteria: What was Nicodemus expected to understand?
 - a. "The Bible was written for us, but not to us. The Bible is for all people at all times & places to read & gain wisdom from. But the Bible was not originally written to us. It wasn't written in any modern language, & it wasn't written with our contemporary society & its assumptions & values in mind. To get the most benefit from [it]...we need to enter their world to hear the words as the original audience would have heard them & as the author would have meant them to be understood. We must read the words on those terms." [Prof. John Walton quoted by Dan Kimball, *How (Not) To Read The Bible*, p. 32]
 - b. "A plausible interpretation must make sense in its narrative context, which is Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisaic member of the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem at an early stage of Jesus' earthly ministry." [Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, p. 82]
 - c. "In this particular narrative context a plausible interpretation should be one available to Nicodemus...The reader must read them as words addressed to Nicodemus." [Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, p. 82]
- c. 'Water' does not mean Christian baptism (Mt. 28:19)
 - a. The claim that "the phrase 'born of water & Spirit' refers to Christian baptism—that is water baptism in close association with the gift of the Spirit, understood as effecting new birth. This view clearly fails my criteria 1." [Point A. 2 above] [Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, pp. 84-5]
 - b. "'Water' is understood by the majority of contemporary commentators to refer to Christian baptism, though there is little agreement amongst them on the relation between 'water' & 'Spirit'...Many accordingly suggest the Spirit effects new birth through water (i.e., baptism). Those who adopt this position, of course, are forced to admit that John's words could have had no relevance to the historical Nicodemus...If water = baptism is so important for entering the kingdom, it's surprising that the rest of the discussion never mentions it again: the entire focus is on the work of the Spirit (3:8), the work of the Son (3:14–15), the work of God himself (3:16–17), & the place of faith (vv. 15–16)." (D. A. Carson, *Pillar NT Commentary: Gospel of John*, p. 151)
 - c. "The frequency with which commentators regard 'water' as an obvious reference to baptism is troubling...It is difficult to see how the author of this Gospel could have made it any clearer that these great realities are linked not with

baptism but with believing in Jesus (3:15–18, etc)! Given the setting in which Jesus says it, and especially the fact that he goes on to speak only of generation ['of the Spirit'] (vv. 6, 8), the phrase ['of water & spirit'] is best understood as an intentional reflection of the way 'water' is used in the prophets as a metaphor for the Spirit. We see this again in 7:37–39." [Allan Chapple, "Jesus & the Witnesses (John 3:11)," JETS, Vol. 63.4 (2020) p. 689 #48]

- d. 'Water' does not mean John's baptism ('of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'; Mark 1:4)
 - a. "The argument presupposes that John the Baptist was so influential at the time that a mere mention of water would conjure up pictures of his ministry. If so...the response of Nicodemus is inappropriate. If the allusion to the Baptist were clear, why should Nicodemus respond with such incredulity, ignorance & unbelief (3:4, 9–10, 12), rather than mere distaste or hardened arrogance?...If John's baptism lies behind 'water' in 3:5, would not this suggest that Jesus was making the Baptist's rite a requirement for entrance into the kingdom, even though that rite was shortly to be superseded by Christian baptism?" (D. A. Carson, Gospel of John, pp. 151-2)
 - b. The Pharisees (including Nicodemus) rejected John's baptism: "All the people...acknowledged God's way of righteousness, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. 30 But since the Pharisees & experts in the law had not been baptized by [John], they rejected the plan of God for themselves." (Luke 7:29-30)
- e. 'Water' does not mean birth waters
 - a. "'Water' has been understood to refer to the amniotic fluid that breaks from the womb shortly before childbirth ...But there are no ancient sources that picture natural birth as 'from water'..." (D. A. Carson, John, p. 150)
- f. Water & Spirit mean cleansing & renewal (Ezek. 36:26-27) – It doesn't point to something you & I must do, but to something God alone must do to rescue us
 - a. 25 I will sprinkle you with pure water, & you will be clean from all your impurities. I will purify you from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart, & I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body & give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my Spirit within you..." (Ezek. 36: 25-27)
 - b. In this proposal "Water is a symbol of the Spirit, as it is explicitly in John 7:37-39...To explain how Nicodemus could have understood this, most proponents appeal to biblical prophecies...especially to Ezekiel 36:25-27 which predicts that God will 'sprinkle clean water' on Israel ...put 'a new heart within' them...& 'put my Spirit within you'..." [Richard Bauckham, Gospel of Glory, pp. 88-89]
 - c. "Many commentators regard Jesus' ['born of water & Spirit'] (3:5) as an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25–27. But it is surprising that more do not note the equally clear connections between 3:6–8 and the next passage in Ezekiel, reporting the prophet's vision of a valley full of human bones (Ezek. 37:1–14). Because a potential association between God's Spirit & wind in Ezek. 37 follows directly upon an association between God's Spirit & purifying water in Ezek. 36, a biblically literate teacher of Israel like Nicodemus should have caught both allusions by the time Jesus finished the second one; but he did not." [Allan Chapple, "Jesus & the Witnesses (John 3:11)," JETS, Vol. 63.4 (2020) p. 689]

2. God Loved and God Gave (Jn. 3:16)

- a. God's character: Love (1 Jn. 4:8)
 - a. "The character of God can...be seen in that God...loves...a world capable of hating him (3:16, 19-20), which means God's love is more than a feeling. It is his commitment to the world, & it is out of such committed love that God sends the Son...to bring love into the world that is alienated from its maker." (Craig Koester, Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 49)
 - b. "Contrary to our inclination toward the 'quid pro quo', [you scratch my back, & I'll scratch yours] God has decided in our favor apart from our ability to reciprocate, gracing us with love prior to & independent of any response we might offer, for no reason other than that love is the very nature of God...love is not one thing among many that God does; 'everything' that God does is loving." [C. Clifton Black, NIB: 1 John, p. 853]
- b. God's Love revealed in Jesus
 - a. "The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds & who asks only that one receive the gift. If one receives the gift, one receives eternal life, because one's life is reshaped & redefined by the love of God in Jesus." (Gail O'Day, NIB, John, p. 474)
 - b. "Jesus went to the cross not only to show his own love for his followers (13:1) but also to reveal the love of God who sent him in order that the world's relationship with God might be restored (3:16)." (Craig Koester, Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 213)
 - c. "The crucifixion is integral to the way God engages the world & conveys his love to it." (Craig Koester, Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 170)
 - d. "The way of the cross is the way of divine love. It was because 'God so loved the world that he gave his Son' to suffer, die, & rise, 'so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life' (3:16). When Jesus reveals God by going the way of the cross, he manifests God's love for the world alienated from its Creator." (Craig Koester, Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 213)

- e. "Just as the new birth, the entrance into eternal life, is grounded in the 'lifting up' of God's Son (3:14-15), so the 'lifting up' is in turn grounded in God's love (3:16)." (GK. Beale & DA. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, p. 436)
- c. God loves the world
- a. The world is troubled people
- a. "The Gospel portrays a world that is troubled & complex. People are created for life in relationship with God, yet are separated from God. They have a need for God, yet are resistant to God. Human beings are sinners...who need to be reconciled with the God from whom they are estranged...[T]hey are also held captive by sin & are oppressed by the powers of evil at work in the world, so that they need to be set free. These tensions & contradictions characterize the human context into which God sends the Son to atone, liberate, & bring life." (Craig Koester, Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 78)
- b. The world refers to all people
- a. "In the broadest sense, the world is God's creation. It has a beginning, & is the sphere in which life is lived. But the Gospel most often focuses on the human world, on the people whom God has made...For Jesus, being in the world means being among Jewish people. Yet the Gospel extends this horizon to include other groups in 'the world'...The Gospel's sense of the world includes ever-widening circles that encompass Jews, Samaritans, & Greeks." (Craig Koester, Word of Life, pp. 80-81)
- c. The world is against God
- a. "...the Gospel...portrays the world as a place of darkness (3:19)." (Craig Koester, Word of Life, p. 12)
- b. "The world in John's Gospel is not characterized by soft summer breezes in the graceful light of dawn, by meadows filled with flowers or gentle waves upon the shore. It requires little effort to love a world like that. But in John's Gospel God loves the world that hates him; he gives his Son for the world that rejects him. He offers his love to a world estranged from him in order to overcome its hostility & bring the world back into relationship with its creator (3:16)." (Craig Koester, The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 81)
- c. "By conveying the Divine love that evokes faith, the crucifixion gives people eternal life. Jesus explains that the Son of Man was lifted up because God so loved the world (3:16)...The crucifixion does this by communicating God's love for the world that hated him." (Craig Koester, Word of Life, p. 45)
- d. God gives Jesus for all people
- a. "'World' in John refers most often to those human beings who are at odds with Jesus & God (1:10; 7:7; 15:18-19). The use of the term [in 3:16] suggests that God gives Jesus in love to all people..." (Gail O'Day, NIB, John, p. 472)
- b. "3:16...sums up 3:14-15 by reiterating the salvific dimensions of Jesus' death, but moves the argument forward with its reference to God's love. God gave Jesus to the world because God loves the world." (Gail O'Day, NIB, John, pp. 471-2)
- e. God's love & salvation are available to all
- a. "The gospel speaks expansively of anyone & everyone who comes to faith, assuming that many can and will believe (3:16, 33, 36; 4:14; 6:48)." (Craig Koester, Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel, p. 79)
- d. God gives the world eternal life (3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2-3)
- a. To know the true God & Jesus
- a. "When defining Eternal life, Jesus simply says that 'this is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (17:3)." (Craig Koester, Word of Life, p. 45)
- b. A life lived in relationship with the eternal God
- a. "Physical death remains a reality for the people of faith, yet the life that faith brings is called eternal because it is a life lived in relationship to the God who is eternal." (Craig Koester, Word of Life, p. 45)
- c. The unending presence of God
- a. "'Eternal' does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God." (Gail O'Day, NIB, p. 471)
- d. A life experienced today
3. A God Who Takes Action (Ezek. 36:22-32; Num. 21:5-9) – 2 images given to Nicodemus
- a. "In the flow of the discourse, Jesus moves from a reference to being born by water & spirit (Ezek. 36:25-27) to...the bronze snake (Num. 21:4-9), which served as the divinely appointed means of new physical life... Correspondingly, Jesus predicts himself as the means of new spiritual life – eternal life – for those who become children of God by looking at the lifted up Savior in faith (3:14-15; 1:12)." (GK. Beale, DA. Carson, Comment. on the NT use of OT, p. 436)
- b. The water & the spirit (Ezek. 36:22-32) – One of the primary RESTORATION passages – to cleanse, transform, renew, restore relationship – "I will..." – 13x's in 7 verses + v. 36b "...I the LORD have spoken – and I will do it."
- c. The bronze snake lifted up (Num. 21:7-9) – instructs Moses how to help his people – Look & Live!
4. God Acts By Lifting Up Jesus (Jn. 3:14-15)
- a. Lifted up means one continuous action of ascent

- a. "In John, being lifted up refers to one continuous action of ascent... Step 1 is Jesus' death; step 2 is his resurrection; & step 3 is the ascension back to heaven. It is the upward swing of the "pendulum" which began with the incarnation, the descent of the Word become flesh from heaven to earth (Phil. 2:6-11)." (NET Bible)
 - b. "The overlap of crucifixion & exaltation conveyed by 3:14 is crucial... because [John] understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, & ascension as one continuous event... As 3:14 makes clear, there is no exaltation apart from the crucifixion for John." (Gail O'Day, NIB, John, p. 471)
 - b. "Look" to have physical life
 - a. "The allusion to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness... is plainly to Numbers 21:8-9... God provide[d] a way of salvation in the form of a raised bronze serpent, so that 'when anyone bitten by a snake... looked at the bronze snake, he lived.' But the primary analogy in [Jn. 3:14] is not... of the raised bronze serpent & the lifted-up Son of Man; rather, Jesus likens the restoration of the people's physical lives as a result of looking at the bronze serpent to the people's reception of eternal life as a result of 'looking' in faith at the Son of Man (3:15-18)." (G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, p. 435)
 - c. Believe to have eternal life
 - a. "God's purpose is indicated in [John 3:14-15]. This passage indicates that Jesus 'must' (dei) be lifted up in crucifixion. Yet... crucifixion is not the goal of God's action; God's purpose is not to have Jesus put to death. Jesus must be crucified 'in order that' people might believe and have life." (Craig Koester, Word of Life, p. 44)
5. Application
- a. The starting point of faith (1 Jn. 4:19)
 - a. "God loves us... with a "first" love, an unlimited, unconditional love, he wants us to be his beloved children..." (Henri Nouwen, Return of the Prodigal Son, p. 106)
 - b. "It might sound strange, but God wants to find [you and] me... God is not the [one] who stays home, doesn't move, & expects his children to come to him, apologize for their [wayward] behavior, beg for forgiveness, & promise to do better." (Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son, p. 106)
 - c. 'Whoever believes in him (Son)' "The starting point of faith does not lie in the fact that the world returned to God in the ascent of the Son of Man & so found its lost self... The starting point is that God in his eternal love returned to the world as to his own, that he loved it in the surrender of his only-begotten Son (cf. 3:35)..." (Herman Ridderbos, Gospel of John, p. 111)
 - b. The Kingdom of God: From Exclusive To Inclusive (Jn. 3:3, 5, 14-16)
 - a. The exclusive Jewish view
 - a. "The Jews expected a future kingdom ruled by the Son of David (Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-5, 10-11; Ezek. 34:23-24; Zech. 9:9-10), the Lord's Servant (Isa. 42:1-7; 49:1-7), indeed, the Lord himself (Ezek. 34:11-16; 36:22-32; Zech. 14:9)... [T]he Jews of Jesus' day generally believed that all Israelites would have a share in the world to come... Hence it is all the more remarkable that Jesus' stipulation that those who would enter God's kingdom must be 'born of water & the spirit' excludes Nicodemus & his fellow Sanhedrin members." (G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson, Commentary on the NT use of the OT, p. 434)
 - b. God's inclusive view (vv. 15-1)- everyone & anyone!
 - c. Believe in Jesus

APPENDIX: What it means to Believe in John 3:16 by Craig S. Koester

"For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one & only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 CSB)

What it means to believe in John 3:16

"John 3:16 does refer to salvation from sin through faith in Jesus, as we usually expect. But we do not catch the full meaning of this verse unless we read the Gospel of John the whole way through. The rest of the Gospel sheds light on what this verse means about the "world" (for instance, it includes Samaritans—see 4:42 in context), on how God expressed his love (by describing the cross), and other issues. We focus here on what John 3:16 means by saving faith. Someone may say he believes in Jesus, yet this person may attend church once a year and continue to live in unrepentant sin (let us say this person murders people every other weekend). Is this person really a Christian? What does it really mean to "believe" in Jesus?

The rest of the Gospel of John clarifies what Jesus means here by saving faith. Just before the conversation in which Jesus speaks 3:16, John tells us about some inadequate believers. Many

people were impressed with Jesus' miracles & "believed" in him, but Jesus refused to put his faith in them because he knew what was really inside them (2:23-25). They had some sort of faith, but it was not saving faith. What would happen if someone professed faith in Christ, then later renounced Christ and became a Muslim or worshiped old Yoruba gods? Would their earlier profession of faith be enough to save them in the end? The question is not hard to answer in light of the rest of John's Gospel, though some of us may not like the answer. Later in the Gospel of John, some of Jesus' hearers "believed" in him, but he warned them that they must continue in his word, so proving to be his disciples and learning the truth which would free them (8:30-32). By the end of the chapter, however, these hearers have already proved unfaithful: they actually want to kill Jesus (8:59). Jesus later warns that those who fail to continue in him will be cast away (15:4, 6). In John's Gospel, genuine saving faith is the kind of faith that perseveres to the end.

The purpose of John's Gospel was to record some of his signs for Christian readers who had never seen Jesus in person, that they might come to a deeper level of faith, the kind of faith that would be strong enough to persevere in following Jesus to the end (20:30-31). John makes this comment right after narrating the climactic confession of faith in this Gospel. Jesus summons Thomas to "believe," and Thomas expresses his faith by calling Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (20:27-28). Jesus' deity is an emphasis in John's Gospel (1:1, 18; 8:58), so of all the other confessions about Jesus' identity in this Gospel (1:29, 36, 49; 6:69), this is the climactic one: He is God. The content of Thomas's faith is correct, but John wants more from his own readers. Correct information about Jesus is necessary, but by itself correct information is not necessarily strong faith. Thomas believed because he saw, but Jesus says that he wants greater faith that can believe even before it sees (20:29). John's readers believe because he narrates his eyewitness testimony to them (20:30-31), confirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit (15:26-16:15).

In John 3:16, saving faith is not just praying a single prayer, then going on our way and forgetting about Jesus for the rest of our lives. Saving faith is embracing Jesus with such radical dependence on his work for us that we stake our lives on the truth of his claims." [Craig S. Koester, *Bible in its Context*, pp. 82-84]