



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Chuck Swindoll says that if he had only one message to declare to Christians, or to anyone for that matter, it would be to stop working so hard to be religious. The Bible teaches that God desires that we live our lives from a mind-set of grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). The passage we will study in this lesson includes one very well-known verse that points to what that really entails:

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”
(John 3:16)

Jesus spoke these compelling words during a conversation He had with a religious leader named Nicodemus about how to enter the kingdom. Listening in, we quickly discover that *religion*—human effort to reach God—is very different from *regeneration*—God’s effort to reach us. Nicodemus soon realizes that the way to salvation is not on the dead-end path of self-righteousness but through the way of perfect righteousness offered by the One standing before him: Jesus, God’s Son!



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

As we turn to this passage, we’ll use the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study to observe, interpret, correlate, and apply the text. Chuck Swindoll’s book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, explains these methods in more detail, and you can purchase a copy at Insight for Living Ministries’ [online store](#). Also, you may wish to check out [Chuck’s commentary on John’s gospel](#).



Observation: What Do You See?

Often in the Gospels, there is much to learn by taking a close look at personal encounters. That is especially true of conversations—or what may be more formally referred to as *dialogue*. In this story from John 3, we can observe much by “listening in” on a very famous conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Quotable

Frankly, one of the most difficult individuals to lead to a knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ is a religious person.

— Charles R. Swindoll



Through observation we can begin to understand why John included this very compelling scene between one who was *religious* and the One who offered *regeneration*.



Searching the Scriptures Tool

Observation is a critical beginning technique to put together the pieces of a passage of Scripture. Read the passage carefully, noticing features such as contrasts, comparisons, repeated words, cause-and-effect, and emphasized words. Particularly notice imperatives (commands) and verbs (action words), which are like tree limbs. All the ideas in the paragraph, like branches and leaves, connect to these words.

The Conversation—Nicodemus and Jesus (John 3:1–4)

Religious people often can be difficult to reach for Christ. Read John 3:1–4 and jot down some clues that indicate Nicodemus may be a tough case.

According to John, what are Nicodemus' credentials (John 3:1, 10)? How is he described?

You probably observed that Nicodemus was a *Pharisee*. Write down what you know about this group of religious leaders. Based on what you know, what are some likely barriers Jesus would encounter in Nicodemus?



A Theological Discussion (John 3:2–13)

In the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus, the topic of salvation is discussed and becomes more theological in nature—meaning, it moves in the direction of wrestling with *how* someone enters the kingdom of God.

What preconceived notions does Nicodemus bring to this discussion?

What metaphor for entering the kingdom does Jesus use that initially confuses Nicodemus?

In John 3:5–8, Jesus contrasts physical birth and the new birth. What are the words and images used to develop this contrast?

What other example from nature does Jesus use to help Nicodemus understand the new birth?



How does Nicodemus respond to this explanation by Jesus?

A Historical Illustration (John 3:14–15)

Sensing Nicodemus' continued confusion, Jesus pulls an illustration from Jewish history to clarify what He means.

What Old Testament story does Jesus use to illustrate how faith in Him brings about eternal life?



Interpretation and Correlation: Finding John's Original Intent

Interpretation answers the question, *What does this passage mean?* To clarify the meaning of a text, first view it through the eyes of the original audience. How did John intend his readers to understand these two stories? Why would he include them back to back in the same section, for instance? Correlation—the *Searching the Scriptures* process that shows how one passage relates in meaning to another—also helps bring clarity to our own interpretation. Let's use both interpretation and correlation to understand the meaning of this important encounter with Jesus.

Belief and Unbelief (John 3:16–18)

At this point in the conversation, Jesus offers what has become the most quoted passage in all the Bible and explains that there are only two possible responses: *belief* or *unbelief*.



Read John 3:16–18. According to Jesus, what is the necessary requirement for anyone who desires eternal life?

When someone believes in Jesus, according to this passage, what is the result?

What is the result of unbelief, according to Jesus?

Light and Darkness (John 3:19–21)

Another theological aspect of the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus illumines why some believe and others do not.

What reasons does Jesus give for why individuals refuse to believe in Him?



What is the primary way in which you can determine if someone resides in spiritual darkness?

How do you know someone has “come to the light” (John 3:21)?

Let’s do some correlation to help us deepen our interpretation of this passage. Look up the following passages, and in the space provided explain in your own words how each relates to Jesus’ explanation of belief versus unbelief and light versus darkness.

John 8:12

2 Corinthians 4:4



Ephesians 1:18

1 John 1:5

Application: Bringing Home the Lessons

Thankfully, like any good storyteller, John doesn't leave us in the dark regarding the outcome of the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. There really is a wonderful ending to this story: Nicodemus believes!

After Jesus died on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea requested His body from Pilate that he might provide Jesus with a proper burial. A man who assisted Joseph in that solemn act of worship was a former religious poser named Nicodemus. Only this time, Nicodemus had left the darkness of unbelief and gladly associated with Jesus in the full light of day (John 19:39–40).

So what will be the end of your story? Will it be a sad tale of regret and sorrow, having lived your whole life in the darkness of unbelief? Or will you stand before Him, clothed in the shining righteousness of Jesus?

There are only two possible responses to Jesus: *belief* or *unbelief*. How will you respond today?

A FINAL PRAYER

Lord, I believe! I put my trust fully and wholly in Your Son, Jesus, as my Savior and my Lord. Thank You for loving me so much that You would send Him to earth, to suffer and die in my place, that I may have eternal life. I worship and adore You. In the matchless name of Jesus Christ, amen.



BEHOLDING CHRIST . . . THE SON OF GOD

Brainstorming the New Birth

John 3:1–21

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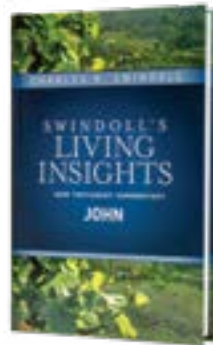
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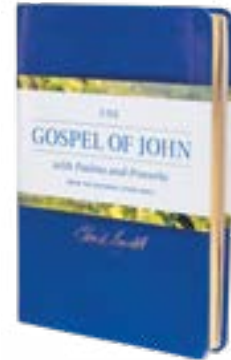
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For the 2018 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Mark Tobey in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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