

JESUS: THE INDESCRIBABLE GIFT

Jesus: The Gift of God's Love

Twelve Daily Studies for Christmas

John 3:1–17; 7:45–52; 19:38–40; Romans 5:8

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

STUDY



So far in our Christmas studies, we've unwrapped God's gifts of grace and truth in the person of Jesus. Now, for the next three days, we'll consider a third gift God gave us through the birth of Jesus. On that momentous night, Mary lovingly swaddled her newborn and laid heaven's greatest treasure in a manger built to hold animal feed. When Mary gazed into her infant's eyes, she peered into the most profound wonder of the universe: God's gift of love to a love-starved world.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

What must've gone through Mary's mind as she held newborn Jesus? According to Luke, after the shepherds came to worship the baby and told Mary and Joseph about the angels who appeared to them, "Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her *heart*" (Luke 2:19 NASB, emphasis added). As you prepare to open the Word, ask the Lord to give you Mary's pondering heart. Bible study is for the heart, not just the mind. So in a moment of silence, invite the Lord to touch your heart with the love of Jesus. You may wish to write your thoughts in a prayer.

Quotable

*Every Christmas,
God announces
to every one of us,
the three words
that are most
important to hear.
He says to us,
"I love you."*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Now read the opening verses of John 3, which describe the encounter of a hungry soul seeking out Jesus in the still of the night.

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” (John 3:1–3)



Observation: Seeking Light in the Darkness

In the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, observation is the first step toward unlocking the meaning of a text and applying its principles. Look closely at the passage and answer the following questions.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, perhaps to catch Jesus in a private moment without interrupting crowds. What piqued Nicodemus' curiosity about Jesus? (Compare John 3:2 with 2:23).

A member of the elite Sanhedrin and a “respected Jewish teacher” (3:10), Nicodemus knew the Bible better than most. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus painstakingly observed every detail of the Old Testament law along with the countless regulations of the rabbinic law. But Jesus, who “knew what was in each person's heart” (2:25), perceived a gaping hole beneath Nicodemus' perfect facade.

If this Sanhedrin official had come to size up Jesus, he quickly realized that he was the one being sized up and found lacking in the most basic truth of the spiritual life. Neither Bible knowledge nor religious duty nor even a direct line to Abraham merits entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus said that Nicodemus must be “born again” (3:3). Let's look at what Jesus meant.



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Interpretation and Correlation: What It Means to Be “Born Again”

The word translated “again” in Greek is *anōthen*, which, according to commentator William Barclay, has three possible meanings:

- (1) It can mean *from the beginning, completely radically*. (2) It can mean *again*, in the sense of *for the second time*. (3) It can mean *from above*, and, therefore, *from God*.¹

Because no English word can communicate all the nuances, most versions of the Bible translate the phrase “born again” and note a secondary translation, “born from above.” Barclay helps us put the pieces together with this insightful interpretation:

To be born anew is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process is not a human achievement, because it comes from the grace and power of God.²

With this meaning in mind, read John 3:4–8.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

Supposing that only people with Abrahamic DNA qualified for God’s kingdom, Nicodemus was fixated on physical birth and completely missed Jesus’ point. What did Jesus say to shift Nicodemus’ perspective from physical to spiritual?



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What light did Titus shed on Jesus' meaning? Highlight the theme of water connected to the Spirit in these verses:

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life. (Titus 3:4–7)

Theologically speaking, the term *regeneration* best captures Jesus and the apostles' teaching on new birth. At Christmas, we celebrate not only the birth of Jesus but also God's plan to give new birth and new life through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit—all motivated by God's heart of love to save us!



Application: Trusting in Jesus

In his message, Chuck Swindoll gave thanks for God's amazing love that is the foundation of our new birth:

Thank You, Father, for sending Jesus and for what prompted You to do so—Your great love for us. We give You thanks for loving us, who are in many ways so unlovely, and yet You find in us a reason to give Your Son. Thank You for Jesus who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Close this study on new birth in Christ with your own prayer of thanksgiving for the radical change the Holy Spirit performed in you when He gave eternal life to your soul through spiritual rebirth. Recall the moment you trusted Christ as your Savior, and give thanks to the baby in the manger who made it possible for you to be born again. And if you've never put your faith in Christ, trust Him now as your source of new life.

In the next study, we'll examine Jesus' illustration of faith drawn from a powerful story of salvation from the Old Testament.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I acknowledge that I have no life in myself apart from the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, who draws me out of the darkness of sin into the light of new birth. Thank You for washing me clean in the waters of Your mercy and generously pouring out the Spirit through Jesus my Savior. It's because of grace I am made right in Your sight. I pray to You with confidence in my eternal inheritance and in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. William Barclay, "The Man Who Came by Night," in *The Gospel of John*, rev. and updated ed., vol. 1, *The New Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), John 3:1–6 (contd), Logos.
2. Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, John 3:1–6, Logos.



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DAY 8

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus—the moment God's Son entered humanity with a mission to change the course of history and save the world. Sin had humankind under a curse of death. "You were *dead* because of your disobedience and your many sins" (Ephesians 2:1, emphasis added), wrote the apostle Paul. But then Jesus changed our destiny through His sin-bearing death and life-giving resurrection.

Through His triumph, Jesus won for us what we were powerless to attain: new life. Paul explained that God "gave us *life* when he raised Christ from the dead" (2:5, emphasis added) and "created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (2:10). The theological word for this heavenly re-creation is *regeneration*. Jesus called it being "born again" (John 3:3).

How does a person become born again? Jesus illustrated to Nicodemus the single requirement using an ancient account from Israel's past that Nicodemus would have known well. Before we eavesdrop on the private conversation between the Savior and the Pharisee, let's prepare ourselves to receive Jesus' teaching.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Charles Wesley reflects on our new birth through Jesus' birth in the third verse of his classic hymn "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Read or sing the words, but take a moment to meditate on their meaning.

Quotable

*Every Christmas,
God announces
to every one of us,
the three words
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*Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings,*

*Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that men no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.¹*

Write a few of your own lines of praise to your Savior who was born to give you second birth.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

We pick up the nighttime conversation after Jesus jolted Nicodemus with the statement, “Unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3). He wrinkled the Pharisee’s brow by explaining only “the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life” (3:6).

“How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked. Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony. But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.” (3:9–15)



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Observation: Believing What We Don't Fully Understand

In the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, the first step is to observe the passage by noting any repeated words, contrasting words, cause and effect, or allusions to other biblical passages.

Circle or highlight the most repeated word in John 3:9–15 and write it down. Also, write down the contrasts that Jesus made between the earthly and the heavenly (John 3:12) as well as between human limitations and His mission (3:13).

What is the focal point of Jesus' message to Nicodemus (3:15)?

Nicodemus was the type of person who had to know *how* a thing worked before he believed it. Jesus, however, told skeptical Nicodemus that it was no use trying to figure out the “new birth.” It was a miracle conceived by the Spirit in the heavenlies. So rather than scrutinize the gift, *believe in the Giver . . .* and receive eternal life!



Interpretation and Correlation: Belief and New Life

To illustrate the connection between belief and eternal life, Jesus drew up for Nicodemus a mental image from the pages of the Pentateuch. Read how Moses lifted the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness so that God healed all who looked upon it (*Numbers 21:4–9*).



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The Israelites' impatience and complaining grew out of their root sin of unbelief, which they vocalized by speaking against God. Of what did they accuse God and Moses (Numbers 21:5)?

The poison from the snakes symbolized the curse of sin coursing through the spiritual bloodstream of humankind. Like snakebites, the bite of sin leads to death in every human. Moses lifting the snake on the pole symbolized God's offer to end His judgment on the Israelites and dispense healing mercy. What event did the lifting of the snake foreshadow, according to Jesus (John 12:32–33)?

The Israelites, who were under the sentence of death, received new life when they looked at the snake on the pole. What point was Jesus making about the act of belief, the object of our belief, and God's merciful response?

The same love that moved God to restore life to the Israelites stirred God to lift up His Son on the cross to give eternal life to all who look to Jesus in faith. What a wonderful act of mercy!



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Application: Because of Love, God Gave His Son

Christmas is not usually a time we think about snakebites and poison, sin and death. But just as a star gleams brighter against a dark sky, the love of God through Jesus shines with even more brilliance against the bleakness of our condition without Christ. As Chuck Swindoll said in his message, “Every Christmas, God announces to every one of us, the three words that are most important to hear. He says to us, ‘I love you.’”

Do you need to hear those words from your heavenly Father this Christmas? Take a moment as you close this study to “listen” to God’s love. What message do you hear God saying to you personally through the birth of His Son?

Today, as you move through the pre-Christmas hustle of shopping or decorating, carry God’s love in your heart as you thank Him for His life-giving gift of Jesus.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, words cannot express the gratitude I feel for the gift of Jesus, who entered the stream of humanity with the mission to bear the judgment for my sin. Help me to live today in the joy and peace of knowing I have been born again—given eternal life because of the One who was born to give me second birth. I worship You with a grateful heart. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles Wesley, altered, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” in *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (n.p.: Word Music/Integrity Music, 1997), hymn 277.



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DAY 9

In the final days before Christmas, most people are busy buying last-minute gifts, finishing decorating, and preparing for guests. At the center of the holiday hubbub amidst the flurry of activity is the tiny figure of the baby Jesus in the nativity set. Although often overlooked next to the lights of the Christmas tree and the colorful spread of wrapped gifts, the figure in the manger represents the essence of Christmas. Everything else is dispensable, mere wrapping to be torn away to reveal the true gift: the love of God in human form—Jesus.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,” begins the most beloved verse in the Bible (John 3:16 NASB). No greater expression of love has been recorded in all the annals of time because no greater gift has been given. As commentator B. Milne explains:

If the depth of love is measured by the value of its gift, then God's love could not be greater, for his love-gift is his most precious possession—his only, eternally beloved Son. He could not love more.¹

Such amazing love! Let's pause from our busy pace for a moment of quiet reflection to prepare our hearts to receive God's love.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

For the next few minutes, set aside your mental to-do list, close your eyes, pace your breathing, and allow yourself to slow down. You may play calming worship music or find a warm spot by a sunny window. Read slowly the following words from John 3:16.

- *For God so loved . . .* Emphasize the word *so*. This is the unfathomable depth of God's love. He loved *so much*.
- *. . . the world . . .* Emphasize *world*. This is the wideness of God's love, which extends beyond those who are worthy or lovable even to those who don't love Him in return.

Quotable

*Every Christmas,
God announces
to every one of us,
the three words
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- . . . *that He gave* . . . Emphasize *gave*. This is the initiative of God's love, which acted not to condemn us but to save us.
- . . . *His only begotten Son* . . . Emphasize *begotten*, which means "one and only." This is the unique manifestation of the love of God, who gave a gift that no one else could give.

Use the space below to ask the Lord to help you receive the full extent of His love as you reflect on the gift of Jesus in this study.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The context of John 3:16–17 is Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Whether the apostle John wrote these words to summarize Jesus' meaning or Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus, Nicodemus got the message. After reading the passage, we'll examine the impact the message had on Nicodemus and apply it to our lives as well. Read the verses from the New Living Translation.

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. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16–17)



Observation: God's Gift of Love

Observing a passage is the first step of the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study. Sometimes we miss details in a familiar passage, so let's read John 3:16–17 again, this time noting the what, why, and how of the passage.

What did God do? Write down the words that describe God's actions.



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Why did God take these actions? Note words or phrases such as *so*, *so that*, or *to*.

How did God send His Son? Jesus made a similar statement in John 3:13, “the Son of Man has come down from heaven.” How did the apostle Paul explain Jesus’ coming down from heaven in *Galatians 4:4–5* and *Philippians 2:7–8*?

Now let’s look closer at how believing in Jesus gains us eternal life.



Interpretation and Correlation: Salvation through Jesus Christ

Paul’s epistle to the Romans, which explains the saving power of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, fleshes out the theology embedded in John’s gospel. Reflect on the connection between John 3:16–17 and Romans 5:8–9.

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation.

What similarities do you see between John 3:16–17 and Romans 5:8–9?



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What additional information did Paul offer about the role of Christ's death in our salvation?

Combine these passages in a summary statement of God's plan of salvation for the world.



Application: Taking the Step of Faith

To discover how Nicodemus responded to Jesus' invitation to believe in Him, we page forward in John's gospel to John 7:50–51. In the context, the Pharisees were pronouncing judgment on Jesus and spewing curses on those who followed Him when Nicodemus spoke up.

Then Nicodemus, the leader who had met with Jesus earlier, spoke up. "Is it legal to convict a man before he is given a hearing?" he asked. (John 7:50–51)

Nicodemus appeared open to Jesus' claims even though the others had already slammed the door shut. After Jesus' crucifixion, Nicodemus emerged from the shadows as a follower of Jesus when he joined Joseph of Arimathea to remove Jesus' body from the cross. Together, "they wrapped Jesus' body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth" and laid His body in the tomb (19:40).

Just as Mary had lovingly wrapped baby Jesus in swaddling cloth and laid Him in a manger, these two courageous men lovingly wrapped Jesus' body in burial cloth and laid Him in a tomb. They had received God's gift of love and responded by saying in their actions, "I love you, Lord Jesus."



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How about you? Right now, join Nicodemus in returning love to the One who loved you enough to come from heaven and die in your place. Write a prayer expressing your belief in Jesus and your love for Him.

Take your prayer with you through the coming busy days of Christmas and read it often.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for loving me so much to send Your Son to die for my sins. As the hymnist writes, “Amazing love! How can it be That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?” Thank You for the gift of grace in Jesus, the gift of truth in Jesus, and most of all the gift of love in Jesus. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 77.



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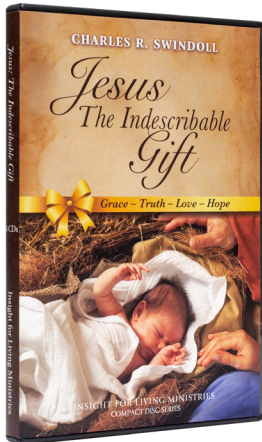
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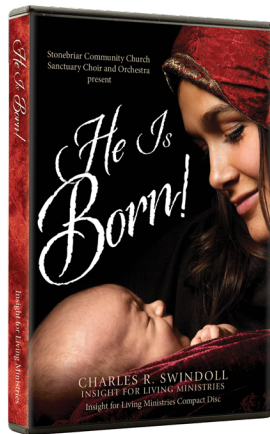
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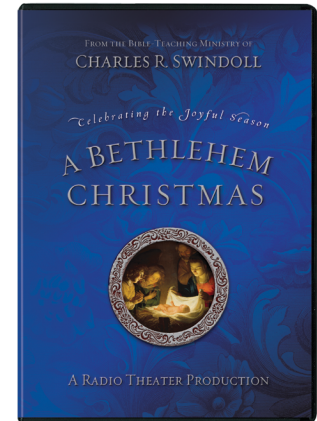
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For the 2018 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's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



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