

LESSON 4

*January 17-23

Grace Is All-Inclusive



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 2:23–4:42.*

Memory Text: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (*John 3:16, NIV*).

Key Thought: The grace of God manifested on the cross plays no favorites. “Whoever believes” will find life in Jesus Christ.

Grace is all-inclusive. In John, chapters 3 and 4, we encounter a pair of living parables in the stories about Nicodemus and about the Samaritan woman. Jesus encounters two individuals who are as opposite as can be. Differing in race, religion, reputation, gender, wealth, location, and behavior, both encounter Jesus away from the crowds. Both find the encounter bewildering and life changing.

In these two stories we see a living parable that unfolds the promise of John 3:16, perhaps the most beloved text in the Bible. God loved the world so much that He gave His beloved Son in order that “whosoever” believes might not perish but have eternal life. In Nicodemus and in the Samaritan woman, we see the opposite extremes of that “whosoever” illustrated. God does not play favorites (*see Acts 10:34, 35*). No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter what your pedigree, no matter how others treat you, Jesus exhibits a glorious lack of prejudice. He is truly the “Savior of the world” (*John 4:42, NIV*).

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 24.*

When Miracles Aren't Enough *(John 2:23-25).*

On what grounds did many people at the Passover Feast come to have “faith” in Jesus? John 2:23.

Words such as *faith* can be used in more than one way in the Gospel of John. Faith can refer to the saving faith in Jesus that the disciples gained after He turned the water into wine at Cana (*John 2:11*). The same disciples attained an even deeper and more lasting faith after the Cross (*vs. 22*) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (*John 7:39*).

But there is another type of faith that is in view in John 2:23-25 and other places: inadequate or superficial faith that is based upon miracles but does not result in a saving relationship with Jesus. In John 2:23-25 Jesus sees right through some followers' profession of faith and discerns their real motives.

As a result of His miracles, many people came to believe in Jesus. Are miracles alone, however, enough for someone to have a saving faith in Him? See also Luke 16:31. Explain your answer.

People sometimes think that if they could see miracles, they would have more faith. But miracles are no cure for superficial faith; they even can get in the way of true faith, hindering us from perceiving the deeper aspects of a relationship with Jesus.

Even with all the miracles Jesus had performed throughout His ministry, many still refused to accept Him, and many turned away when they saw that He wasn't going to do everything they expected Him to do. (*See John 6:51-66 and Ellen G. White, "The Crisis in Galilee," in The Desire of Ages.*) What this should tell us is that while a personal experience with Jesus is crucial for a saving faith, faith needs to go beyond mere experience; it needs to be rooted and grounded in a living knowledge of who we are, what our condition is, and what Christ has done in order to spare us from the fate that our condition would otherwise bring to us.

Look at your walk with the Lord. On what is it based? Miracles, experience, reason, emotion? Is your faith grounded in a reality deeper than mere emotions or experience alone? Write out a paragraph describing why you believe what you do.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *John 3:16*

Teachers Aims:

1. To demonstrate how God's grace is given freely to all.
2. To examine our motives in our relationship with God.
3. To view others as God, as seen in Jesus, views them.

Lesson Outline:

I. Indiscriminate Grace (*John 1:12*).

- A. The stories of Nicodemus and of the Samaritan woman at the well reveal the universal human need for divine grace.
- B. Human self-sufficiency or merit is an illusion.
- C. Religion itself can often be a source of unwarranted self-confidence.

II. At the Core (*John 5:39, 40*).

- A. What we may view as trust in God may really be trust in self.
- B. Only a new birth can allow us to follow God in a true sense.
- C. This new birth is the most important—and perhaps the only—faith-building miracle.

III. Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? (*John 4:23*).

- A. Jesus explicitly rejected the ethnic chauvinism of His day, even that which seemed religiously based.
- B. Jesus' message is to the world, not any particularly favored portion of it.
- C. The universality of the message was central to its meaning.

Summary: Central to John's message is the emphasis on the fact that Jesus came to save everyone in the world who would accept Him. The only requirement was a willingness to experience the new birth. Next to this new birth, other religious phenomena are unimportant.

COMMENTARY.

The saving grace of Jesus knows no race, nationality, gender, language, status, or caste. Its requirement is as simple as it is dynamic: " 'Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life' " (*John 3:16, NKJV*). All who accept Christ's redemptive work on the cross shall have eternal life.

This week's lesson shows that eternal life is born of the Spirit, a result of the Cross, and an experience all can have.

I. Eternal Life: Born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus was a soul in struggle. As a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a Pharisee who loved the law, he knew the rudiments of religion and the routines of its practice.

MONDAY January 19

He Came by Night (*John 3:1-21*).

In the Gospel of John, the narratives become living parables of the spiritual realities offered in Jesus. In Nicodemus (“a witness of the scene when Jesus drove out the buyers and the sellers”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 168), we see a living example of a person who, though a highly esteemed religious leader, had inadequate faith.

On what basis does Nicodemus consider Jesus a teacher who has come from God? *John 3:2. See also John 2:23-25.*

When Nicodemus says “We know,” he represents those in the previous passage (*John 2:23-25*) who saw what Jesus did in the temple but came to have inadequate faith as a result. “His [Nicodemus’s] words were designed to express and to invite confidence; but they really expressed unbelief.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 168.

The Greek word for “night” in this verse comes in a form that emphasizes not so much the dark part of the day as the quality of darkness, the darkness in Nicodemus’s soul at the time he comes to Jesus. He has seen what Jesus did in the temple, but he doesn’t perceive the real truth about Jesus, that He is the Word made flesh.

Read John 3:3-10, Christ’s immediate response to Nicodemus. Why does Nicodemus’s response reveal just how little this religious leader knew of crucial spiritual truth?

This story shows Jesus reading the heart of another human being (*see John 2:25*). Nicodemus cannot hide his spiritual ignorance behind the veneer of religiosity, of forms and customs, at least not from Jesus.

In the Nicodemus story, John continues the themes emphasized in chapter 2. Jesus replaces Nicodemus’s religious ideas with the truth about the new birth, with the Cross as the ground for everything that Jesus offers. The kingdom of God is entered not by physical birth but by a personal decision that everyone, even a leader of the Jews, such as Nicodemus, has to make.

We might be very religious, faithful in all the forms and traditions of our faith, but according to today’s study, what is the one thing we must have? Ask yourself which category you fall into. If it is not the right one, what must happen for you to be changed?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

However, a void within drove him to Jesus. Nicodemus came by night, perhaps out of caution or fear; but it is better to come to Jesus at night than not to come at all, for coming may make all the difference between eternal loss and eternal life. Were it not for that interview between a cautious Pharisee and a loving Lord, we may not have inherited the beauty and the promise of John 3:16, and our Lord's broken body may not have received the reverent and decent burial it did (*John 19:39*).

Nicodemus did not ask the question. But Jesus gave the answer just the same. He "knew all men" (*John 2:24*) and could read the cry of Nicodemus's heart. That cry was more than the cry of an individual. It is the pang of humanity. Jesus at once revealed to Nicodemus and us the basis of salvation and eternal life: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (*John 3:3*).

A transformed life, the essence of the born-again experience, is the basis of eternal life. Salvation is not a commodity to be purchased by one's wealth or achieved by one's good works. In a single stroke, Jesus toppled the foundation of every religion's approach to salvation and proclaimed to weary souls everywhere that eternal life is based on a grace made possible by Him who alone can transform the old into new. The psalmist was right: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (*Ps. 51:10*).

Eternal life does not come from biology or psychology, science or art. It must ever be "born of the Spirit" (*John 3:8*).

"The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 172.

II. Eternal Life: A Result of the Cross.

"For God so loved the world," says the Bible's favorite passage. If God's love conceived the plan of salvation, the execution of the plan was a result of the second part of that passage: "that He gave His only begotten Son" (*vs. 16, NKJV*). The uniqueness of God's gift was not that He gave His Son but that He gave Him to die for our sins. Jesus knew this way ahead of the Cross itself: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (*John 3:14, 15*). Without the Cross, there could be no forgiveness of sins nor eternal life. The Cross distinguishes the way of Christ from every other way. All other ways may be philosophically brilliant, logically adequate, intellectually stimulating, but woefully inadequate in providing what the human heart needs most: forgiveness. For that, one must come to the Cross, or else there is only chaos. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (*John 3:36*).

TUESDAY *January 20*

The New Birth (*John 3:3-8*).

The name *Nicodemus* means “leader of the people.” He was undoubtedly a pious man, an example of the best that Judaism could offer. As a Pharisee, he took the Scriptures and his faith seriously. He no doubt would have made a good neighbor. Jesus’ response to this good man, this faithful and godly man, is, therefore, somewhat surprising.

What do even “good” and pious people need in order to enter the kingdom of God? *John 3:3, 5*. **What do you understand this to mean?**

If Nicodemus had been part of the delegation of Pharisees who questioned John the Baptist (*John 1:24-28*), he would have been aware of John’s claim that baptism by water heralded the coming of the One greater than John—of the Messiah. As good and pious as Nicodemus was, he needed a new birth that could come only from the Messiah through baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Water and Spirit are closely related in Jesus’ teaching (*John 4:10-14, 23, 24; 7:37-39*). And the concept of being “born from above” is related to the ministry of John in *John 3:22-36*. So Jesus’ statement here suggests the need for a double baptism, an outward one by water and an inward one by the Holy Spirit.

Read again what Jesus says to Nicodemus. **In what ways do His words show us the utter futility of saving ourselves and our entire dependence upon God for salvation?** *See also Isa. 25:9, Titus 3:5, Heb. 9:12.*

Though we saw in Sunday’s section how experience alone (such as witnessing miracles) isn’t enough for a saving faith, Christ’s words to Nicodemus show at the same time just how crucial experience is to the Christian. A new birth is, indeed, nothing if not an experience. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and us, that a knowledge of forms, customs, even correct doctrine, isn’t enough. We must experience, personally, His saving power in our lives.

If someone asks you, Have you been born again? what would you answer? And if the answer is Yes, what grounds do you have for saying so?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

III. Eternal Life: An Experience All Can Have.

The experience of the Samaritan woman in John 4 is an excellent example of the reality of the “whosoever” in John 3:16. If one needs an illustration of how divisive sin is and how impenetrable the wall of separation between humans can be, one needs to look

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *John 3:4, 5; 4:39, 40; 1 Corinthians 14:1; Colossians 3:11; James 2:18, 19*

❶ As in Jesus’ time, people today struggle with accepting others from different backgrounds, etc. Some even use the Bible to justify such attitudes. Yet, the inclusiveness of Jesus’ message seems obvious. How and why might people dodge this inclusiveness?

❷ Most people have faith in something and sometimes in a number of things at once. John 2:23-25 suggests that faith can be faith yet still not be adequate. What is the difference between saving faith and lukewarm faith? How can we be sure we have the saving variety?

Read Romans 3:28 and James 2:18, 19. At first, these passages seem to contradict each other. Why, however, do they not? What texts support your answer?

❸ While belief in miracles and “peak experiences” may not substitute for genuine faith, few people would deny that such events have value. What is this value?

❹ In Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, Nicodemus expresses ignorance about what seems to us to be fundamental spiritual principles. Was Nicodemus being intentionally ignorant? If so, why? What lesson is there for us in Nicodemus’s reaction?

❺ What do you think John was trying to say by demonstrating how much more receptive the Samaritan woman was to Jesus’ teaching than were the “religious” people? What does it say to those for whom Christianity itself is just another way to be “religious”?

❻ Discuss the differences that existed between the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus. What are the differences and the similarities in the way each responded to Jesus? In the way Jesus responded to them? What does this teach us about how we should approach others with the gospel?

WEDNESDAY *January 21*

She Came by Day (*John 4:1-42*).

Read over the entire account of Jesus with the woman at the well and then answer these questions:

- **How does the woman at the well react to Jesus at first?** *John 4:9, 11, 12.*
- **What makes the woman believe that Jesus is a prophet?** *John 4:17-19, 29.*

Put yourself in the place of this woman: Here is this stranger, someone from a rival religion, in fact, who quickly reveals that He knows some of her darkest, most personal secrets. No wonder she had a change of attitude! Thus, it is not the physical presence of Jesus that convinces the woman that He is the Messiah (His physical appearance apparently meant nothing to her)—it is His word. Here, again, John underlines the theme that Jesus' word is as good as His touch.

Read carefully **John 4:21-24**. **What point is Jesus making to her? What is He seeking to lead her toward?**

John 4:23, 24 recalls the cleansing of the temple in chapter 2. Jesus has come to earth to restore the proper worship of God. A localized temple favors one people over another; worship in spirit, however, is universal. It is not tied to any geographical place or particular people. Jesus brings out that the location of worship is not nearly as important as the attitude of the worshiper. It is not so much where we worship as whom we worship.

In the story of the Samaritan woman, John continues the themes of chapters 2 and 3. For one thing, Jesus knows all about the Samaritan woman. He reads her heart and her history, as He did with Nicodemus. This knowledge gives her the confidence to proclaim Him. In return, Jesus replaces the worship of the Samaritans with a more adequate faith based on Spirit and truth.

Notice something not explicit in this story: Jesus exposes the woman's darkest sins, and yet when she leaves, she tries to get others to come to Jesus. Why did she not keep quiet about this Man who could do her much harm? What does her attitude about Jesus tell us about how Jesus must have treated her, despite her sin? What lessons are here for us in how we deal with sinners?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

only at Nicodemus and this woman. Yet, Jesus built a bridge between the Jew and the Samaritan, between women and men. This bridge is open to all who believe that Jesus is the Redeemer. Neither the self-righteousness of the Pharisee nor the sinfulness of the Samaritan could block the working of God's love or hinder the power of His transforming grace. Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth must fall prostrate at the feet of Him who linked earth and heaven together forever by a Cross.

“No circumstance of birth or nationality, no condition of life, can turn away His love from the children of men. To every soul, however sinful, Jesus says, If thou hadst asked of Me, I would have given thee living water.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 194.

Witnessing

Alfred Bernhard Nobel, a Swedish inventor, provided in his will for the establishment of funds that would be awarded annually to five different individuals or institutions for their achievements in designated fields, including medicine and international peace. Nobel indicated in that only those who were most worthy should receive the awards, regardless of nationality. It did not matter to him what the financial status was of those receiving the money, what country they were from, or what ethnic group they belonged to—only that they were the ones who had made the greatest contributions to the fields he had selected.

The intangible things of God seem to have no boundaries. Love has no color, shape, nor size. Neither does joy, honor, nor peace. Each of these attributes is genderless. None are limited by time or space, and anyone can possess them. God's gifts are free to all. So it is with God's grace. It is “all-inclusive.”

God's grace was all-inclusive for Nicodemus, a well-known religious leader with hidden sins. Christ told Nicodemus he must be born again, thus giving him the opportunity to experience new life (new birth) in Himself. His grace was for an unknown Samaritan woman who was living in open sin. To her, He also wanted to give new life in Himself, the Living Water.

As we witness to others, we, too, should be “no respecter of persons” (*Acts 10:34*). We can share the message of the gospel with all those with whom we come in contact: children and adults, friends and strangers, those of other races, those of other religions, those we like, and those we may not like. “Go ye therefore, and teach all . . .” is our great command (*Matt. 28:19*).

THURSDAY January 22

The Attraction of Opposites.

As a result of the woman's testimony and of their own encounter with Jesus, what do the Samaritans come to believe about Jesus? John 4:42. Also, what was it about Jesus that causes them to believe?

“Savior of the world” means that salvation is no longer bound by ethnic or geographic considerations. In Jesus all peoples, including despised groups such as the Samaritans, can claim the fullness of God's favor. For the scorned and rejected, this kind of salvation comes as a great and welcome surprise. To those who oppress and exclude, this great salvation comes as the shattering of a world in which everyone knows his or her “place.”

What are all these texts telling us? Acts 10:28, 17:26, Col. 3:11, 1 John 2:2.

It is said that in relationships opposites attract. The stories about Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman portray these two in stark contrast to each other. Nicodemus is a man, the Samaritan a woman. He is a Jew, a Pharisee no less, she a lowly Samaritan. He comes by night; she comes at noon. He is rich (*John 19:39*); she is poor (or she would not have been fetching her own water in the heat of the day). He is highly educated (“the” teacher of Israel [*John 3:10*]); she is, as a woman in first-century Palestine, probably illiterate. He is pious (a Pharisee), she an adulteress. He is highly respected; she is (probably) despised and rejected, even by her own Samaritan neighbors. He has a great name, known from ancient writings outside the Bible; she is anonymous. He lives in the holy city, Jerusalem; she lives in Sychar, (which means “drunkenness”). He is open to believe yet slow to accept; she is suspicious at first yet quick to embrace Jesus when she realizes who He is.

In these two stories, we see a living parable of John 3:16. God sent His Son so that “whoever believes” might have eternal life. In these two individuals we see the opposite extremes of that “whoever.” No matter who you are, your station in life, or your sinful condition, you are welcome to receive Him. He is truly the “Savior of the world” (*John 4:42 NIV*). See the quotation in Friday's section.

Considering what we have studied today, why is racism so offensive in the sight of God?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: “The verb to lift up is *hupsoun*. The strange thing is that it is used of Jesus in two senses. It is used of his being lifted up upon the Cross; and it is used of his being lifted up into glory at the time of his ascension into heaven. . . . There was a double lifting up in Jesus’s life—the lifting on the Cross and the lifting into glory. And the two are inextricably connected. The one could not have happened without the other. For Jesus the Cross was the way to glory; had he refused it, had he evaded it, had he taken steps to escape it, as he might so easily have done, there would have been no glory for him. It is the same for us. . . . It is an unalterable law of life that if there is no cross, there is no crown.”—William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: John 1*, pp. 134, 135.

Thought Questions:

- 1 The Cross and the crown show no discrimination. They are both manifestations of God’s grace to humanity, be we sinners or saints. Study the ways grace distinguishes Christianity from other world religions. How could you use “grace” to introduce someone to Jesus?
- 2 Nicodemus was a Pharisee. To be a Pharisee meant to be part of a brotherhood, an elite sect, who devoted their lives to the observance of every detail of the law. No one matched a Pharisee when it came to such diligence. Yet, Nicodemus came to Jesus looking for a better life. In what ways can the church be so caught up in the rituals of religion that it loses sight of the better life?

Application Questions:

- 1 John 3:16 is often referred to as “everybody’s text.” How do Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman illustrate this? From your personal life, give illustrations that are a testimony to this verse.
- 2 As Nicodemus did, take an inventory of your life. In what ways are you a closet Pharisee? What are the “laws” you observe just because such behavior is expected of you? How could making time at least once a week to do something that focuses on your love for God and others serve as a way to break the chains of legalism that bind you?

Further Study: “Jesus had begun to break down the partition wall between Jew and Gentile, and to preach salvation to the world. Though He was a Jew, He mingled freely with the Samaritans, setting at nought the Pharisaic customs of His nation. In the face of their prejudices He accepted the hospitality of this despised people. He slept under their roofs, ate with them at their tables—partaking of the food prepared and served by their hands—taught in their streets, and treated them with the utmost kindness and courtesy. . . .

“Those who call themselves His followers may despise and shun the outcast ones; but no circumstance of birth or nationality, no condition of life, can turn away His love from the children of men. To every soul, however sinful, Jesus says, If thou hadst asked of Me, I would have given thee living water.

“The gospel invitation is not to be narrowed down, and presented only to a select few, who, we suppose, will do us honor if they accept it. The message is to be given to all.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 193, 194.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 **How can we gain a clearer insight into the deceitfulness of our own hearts? In what type of setting are you most willing to confess your mistakes to others? How can the church help to create such settings?**
- 2 **To what degree is it possible for Christians today to have the kind of discernment of others’ thoughts, motivations, and feelings that Jesus had? If we can’t, what should that fact tell us about why we need to be very careful not to judge the hearts of others?**

Summary: The penetrating gaze of Jesus changes everything. Self-assured people become uncertain. Despised people find new life. Comfortable churches learn to shun business as usual. The Spirit blows where it wills. So it should not be surprising that when Christians become more like Jesus they shake things up too. As was the case also for Jesus, this “shaking” will not be greeted everywhere with joy. Both inside and outside the church, many prefer the comfortable security of a life that is undisturbed by the troublesome wind of the Spirit. These oppose the freedom of the Spirit with every fiber of their being.