

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.*

SUNDAY *January 18*

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.

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?

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?

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?

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?

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.

Behind Every Door— Part 2

TARS MASYUK

Tars was tired; he had just one more apartment to visit in the building, but one look at the door and he was tempted to skip it. Then he reminded himself of his promise to visit every apartment.

Tars raised his hand to knock on the aging and broken door. Surely the person living here spends their meager earnings on things other than his or her home, he thought.

A man answered the knock and opened the door. He hesitated before he let Tars come in, saying his apartment was untidy. And it was. Plastic bags filled with empty alcohol bottles littered the floor. Tars decided that the man must collect empty vodka bottles to earn money for his own alcohol.

Tars wondered what he should say to the man. “Do you believe in God?” he asked.

The man answered, “Yes, somewhere in my heart I believe in God, but I do not think there is anything that can help me in my situation.”

Tars shared stories of others whose lives God had rescued from drugs, alcohol, and other vices. He assured the man that Christ can change his heart, too. Tars sensed that the man wanted his life to change but was not sure it was possible. Tars showed the man *Steps to Christ* and told him that of all the books he had, this one was the most powerful and could show him how much God wanted him as His child. The man was interested, and when Tars told him the book was \$1, the man began searching for money. He dug into his pockets, into the couch, every place he had ever left money, until he found enough to buy the book.

Tars knew that to buy this book the man would go hungry, but the man wanted the book. “Now I have no money for bread,” he said, handing the money to Tars.

“Take out a few rubles for bread, and I will make up the amount myself,” Tars answered. The man agreed and began asking many questions about religion. Tars hesitated, then showed him *The Great Controversy*, and said it would answer many of his questions.

The man wanted that book too, but had no money. “I know!” he said. “I will collect enough bottles to buy this book, too!” And he did.

The names of everyone who bought literature or showed an interest in religion were given to the local church to visit. Great harvests will be reaped as people turn their hearts to God instead of alcohol.

TARS MASYUK *recently graduated from Zaoksky Theological Seminary.*