

Session 10

Born of Water and the Spirit

The sentence the whole study is named for, spoken to a teacher at night.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the Lord's own summary of everything they have traced: *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (John 3:5). They watch Nicodemus stumble where Naaman stumbled, hear Jesus expect Israel's teacher to recognize Ezekiel's promise, and discover from the chapter's own next verse what Jesus went out and did immediately after saying it.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism quotes John 3:5 as Baptism's charter and states its weight plainly: the Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation (CCC 1215, 1257), while holding with equal firmness that God himself is not bound by his sacraments. Tonight the study's title text arrives, and the master question receives the Lord's own answer.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study reaches the sentence it is named for, and the leader should feel the room's nine weeks converging on it. A ruler of the Pharisees comes to Jesus by night: Nicodemus, cautious, courteous, real. Jesus answers the question Nicodemus has not yet asked: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God* (John 3:3). The Greek *anōthen* means both *anew* and *from above*, and many interpreters hear John exploiting both senses: a second birth, whose source is heaven. Nicodemus hears only the impossibility: *How can a man be born when he is old?* And every member of your group should hear, underneath his question, a riverbank from Session 6: a scarred commander coming up out of the Jordan with *the flesh of a little child*. The Old Testament had already answered Nicodemus's question with a picture; tonight the Lord answers it with a law.

The law is verse 5, and read it with the care its grammar deserves: *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*. One preposition governs both nouns: born of water-and-Spirit, a single birth from a joined source, not two births from two sources. The pairing your group has counted since Genesis 1:2, watched become a promise in Ezekiel 36, heard split into present-and-future in the Baptist's sentence, and seen united over the Jordan in Session 9, is here pronounced by the Lord as the condition of entering the kingdom. The study's master question, why water, now has its final form: because the Lord joined water to the Spirit and made the pair the doorway of the new birth.

Verse 10 is the session's hidden hinge, and do not let the group miss it: *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?* Jesus expects Nicodemus to recognize this. From where? Your group knows exactly where, because they sat in it three weeks ago: *I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new heart... and I will put my spirit within you*. Water and Spirit making a person new is Ezekiel's promise, and Israel's teacher is being gently rebuked for not knowing his own prophets. Jesus' rebuke is the

study's method vindicated from the Lord's own mouth: the Old Testament was supposed to make this recognizable.

Tonight's steelman is the most important exegetical dispute in the entire study, and your group deserves it complete. Serious Protestant interpreters, refusing to let John 3:5 teach baptismal regeneration, read *water* three main ways: as natural birth (the water of the womb: born of water = born the first time, then born of Spirit), as a symbol of the Spirit himself (water-even-the-Spirit, leaning on John 7:38–39 where living water is glossed as the Spirit), or as inapplicable to Christian Baptism since Nicodemus could not yet have known of it. Give all three at full strength; the answer box takes them in turn, and its decisive move is tonight's discovery: the group finds John 3:22 themselves, the verse nobody quotes, where the very next thing Jesus does after this conversation is go into Judea and baptize. The evangelist placed the interpretation in the itinerary.

Carry the necessity question with both hands, as the study has since Session 6. CCC 1257 says the Lord himself affirms Baptism's necessity, and in the same paragraph says God is not bound by his sacraments. Tonight leans on the first clause because the text does; Session 14 will honor the second fully (baptism of desire, of blood, and God's freedom toward the unbaptized). If grief about an unbaptized person surfaces tonight, do not defer comfort: give the second clause immediately and gently, and promise the fuller conversation.

End preparation with Nicodemus's whole arc, because it is one of Scripture's great slow conversions and your mixed room needs it: he comes by night (3:1–2); he defends Jesus's right to a hearing before the Sanhedrin (7:50–51); and he appears at the end with Joseph of Arimathea, carrying a hundred pounds' weight of myrrh and aloes to bury the Lord (19:39), openly, at the most dangerous hour to be counted a disciple. John never records Nicodemus's baptism, but he shows us a man walking, across the whole length of the Gospel, from night toward the light. Somebody in your room is Nicodemus. Let the arc tell them the door stays open, and note where his story ends: at the cross, which is where this study goes in two weeks.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.

Ezekiel 36:25, 27 (RSV2CE)

The teacher of Israel was expected to recognize the promise when its Maker restated it:

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

John 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?"

John 3:10 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *First Apology*, ch. 61

St. Justin, writing one of the earliest surviving accounts of how Christians baptize (mid-second century; the Didache's brief instructions are earlier still), teaches in substance that candidates are

brought where there is water and are regenerated there, born again as we were born again; and the warrant he gives Rome's pagan readers is the Lord's new-birth saying, in the compressed form Justin cites, that unless you are born again you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Leader note: Notice what this is: in the mid-second century, when the Church explains her water rite to outsiders, the saying she reaches for is the Lord's word to Nicodemus. The earliest recorded reading of the new-birth saying is the baptismal one.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on the Gospel of John*

St. John Chrysostom, preaching through this chapter, teaches in substance that in the font the water becomes to the believer what the womb is to the child: in it the new person is fashioned and formed, and what the Spirit works there is a true generation, not a metaphor for one. For Chrysostom, Nicodemus's mistake was not taking birth too literally but taking God too weakly.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan • *On the Mysteries*

St. Ambrose, catechizing at the font where this study began with him, teaches in substance that the Lord's sentence binds the two together: not water without the Spirit, and not the Spirit without the water, for the one birth is of water and the Spirit; whoever would divide what Christ joined must answer to the plain shape of his words.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1215 places tonight's verse at the center of Baptism's very name: this sacrament is called the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one can enter the kingdom of God. Note the Catechism's two verbs, signifies and actually brings about: the whole sacramental claim in four words. CCC 1257 opens with tonight's weight: the Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation, and closes with the balance the study has carried since Naaman: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.

CCC 1225 belongs to tonight's forward edge, and read it in preparation without quoting it to the group: it teaches that in his Passover Christ opened to all men the fountain of Baptism, and that the blood and water from his pierced side are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, so that from then on it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit and enter the kingdom. The Catechism hangs tonight's verse on an event the group has not reached yet. Two more weeks.

Paragraphs for this session: 1215, 1225, 1257

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread: COMPLETED TONIGHT): Session 7 resolved the sealed question with God's promise; tonight the Lord pronounces the promise as the law of the new birth. The full arc for your own clarity: water, because we are bodies; water, because it cleanses, drowns, and births; water, because God promised it; water, because the Son sanctified it; water, because he joined it to the Spirit and made the pair the door. Let the group assemble this in the Send discussion in their own words.

Like the flesh of a little child (Session 6: RESOLVED TONIGHT): Nicodemus asks the question Naaman's skin already answered. The group should make this connection at Q2; if no one does, ask what Syrian commander they know who came up from a river with a child's flesh.

The teacher should have known (Session 7 callback: RESOLVED TONIGHT): verse 10 is Ezekiel 36 knocking. Draw it explicitly.

Lifted up like the serpent (planted tonight from 3:14–15, resolved Session 12): one sentence: the conversation that begins with water ends by pointing at a cross. Do not develop.

Nicodemus's arc (planted tonight, completed Session 12): he will be at the burial. Say only: keep an eye on this man.

Session Goals

1. The group has read John 3:1–21 aloud in parts and can quote verse 5 from memory by night's end.
2. The group can explain the single-birth grammar: born of water-and-Spirit together, one doorway, not two births.
3. The group has connected verse 10 to Ezekiel 36 and verse 4 to Naaman: the Old Testament made this recognizable.
4. All three steelman readings of *water* have been heard at full strength and answered, with John 3:22 discovered by the group as the context's own verdict.
5. The necessity of Baptism has been stated with both CCC 1257 clauses, gently and clearly.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: John 3:1–10; the night visit, the impossibility, the rebuke; Q1-Q3

10 min • Build: the grammar of verse 5 and the completed pairing; Q4

10 min • Live discovery: John 3:22 and 4:1–2

20 min • Steelman: the three readings of water, in full

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q1 can merge into the leader's framing of the night visit, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the discovery of 3:22 or any of the three steelman prongs; tonight's steelman is the study's most consequential.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you received a cautious man at night and told him the truth in one sentence. We come with our own caution and our own night. Say the sentence again over us, and give us Nicodemus's stubborn patience: to keep walking toward the light until we are standing in it. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Nicodemus came with questions but came at night, where no one would see. Where in your life do you keep your seeking private, and what would it cost to bring it into daylight?

QW2. Has God ever answered a question you had not worked up the courage to ask yet? What did that feel like?

Build • into the text

Assign parts (narrator, Jesus, Nicodemus) and read John 3:1–15 aloud. Then return to the beginning and walk it.

Q1. Nicodemus opens with a compliment and a credential: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.* Jesus answers a question Nicodemus never asked. What does Jesus' abrupt *unless one is born anew* tell us about what Nicodemus actually came for, and about what entering the kingdom requires?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jesus reads through the courtesy to the hunger: Nicodemus wants to know if the kingdom is arriving and whether his credentials will carry him into it. The answer razes the premise: entry is not by advancement but by birth. Nobody achieves being born; birth is received, done to you, the one event in your existence you contributed nothing to. Whatever the new birth is, it is grace before it is anything else: which is exactly what the group heard in Ezekiel's *not for your sake* and will hear in Paul in two weeks.

Q2. Nicodemus: *How can a man be born when he is old?* Before we let Jesus answer him, let the Old Testament answer him. Where has this study already watched a grown man come up from water with the flesh of a child?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Naaman: the scarred commander who went down into the Jordan under protest and came up with *the flesh of a little child* (2 Kings 5:14). Nicodemus's impossibility had already been pictured, in the same river where John was baptizing while he asked. The Old Testament had answered the question with a picture; Nicodemus is standing in front of the answer in person and cannot see it yet. Be gentle with him; it took the whole study for us to see it.

Q3. Verse 10: *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?* Jesus expects the teacher of Israel to recognize new birth by water and Spirit. From which scroll? Your group already knows; say it together.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Ezekiel 36: clean water sprinkled, a new heart, *my spirit within you*. The rebuke of verse 10 is the study's method certified by the Lord himself: the Old Testament was supposed to make tonight's sentence recognizable, and a teacher of Israel is answerable for the prophets he carries. Jesus is not inventing a novelty in verse 5; he is restating a promise and standing next to its fulfillment.

Q4. Now the grammar of the sentence itself: *born of water and the Spirit*. One birth or two? One source or two? And what has this study been counting for ten weeks that arrives, finished, in this phrase?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

One preposition governs both nouns, presenting a single birth from water-and-Spirit together: strong grammatical support for one joined birth, not two: though the argument's full weight rests on grammar and context and Tradition together, not grammar alone. Which is the arrival of everything counted since the Spirit moved over the face of the waters: creation, flood, sea, Jordan, promise, and the descent at the Lord's own baptism. The pairing was never decoration. It was the doorway being built, and here the Lord hangs the door.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt, and tonight it is a single verse away. Say to the group: whole books have argued about what *water* means in verse 5. The evangelist answered with an itinerary. Read what Jesus does immediately after this conversation: find **John 3:22**, and then **John 4:1–2** for the detail. What is the very next scene?

After this... Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized (with 4:2 noting his disciples administered it). Fresh from saying born of water and the Spirit, the Lord goes out and runs a baptizing ministry. Let the group feel the force: context weighs heavily where controversy has obscured.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection comes in three serious forms, and each is held by Christians of real learning. First: *water* means natural birth, the water of the womb; Jesus contrasts first birth (water, flesh) with second birth (Spirit), as verse 6's flesh-and-Spirit contrast confirms; so the verse requires no baptism at all, only regeneration by the Spirit. Second: *water* is a symbol of the Spirit himself, water-even-the-Spirit; John himself glosses living water as the Spirit later in this very Gospel (7:38–39), so verse 5 names one reality twice, and dragging a rite into it misses Johannine idiom. Third: whatever it means, it cannot mean Christian Baptism, which did not yet exist and which Nicodemus could not possibly have understood; Jesus does not rebuke people for missing anachronisms.

Q5. Take them in order, and concede first: what does each reading get right about the text?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Each catches something. The first is right that verse 6 contrasts flesh and Spirit; the second is right that John elsewhere images the Spirit as water; the third is right that Nicodemus stood before Pentecost, and Jesus does not demand anachronisms. Now weigh each.

The womb reading has a lexical problem and a grammatical one. Born of water was not an idiom for natural birth: no one has produced ancient texts where it functions that way, and positing an otherwise unattested idiom carries a heavy burden of proof. And the grammar resists the split: verse 5 joins water and Spirit under one preposition as one birth's source, while verse 6's contrast runs between the two births (flesh-born versus Spirit-born), not between the two nouns of verse 5. The flesh of verse 6 corresponds to the first birth as a whole, not to the water of verse 5, which sits on the Spirit's side of the line, inside the birth from above.

The symbol reading proves too much and ignores too much. Yes, John can image the Spirit as living water; but in verse 5 water and Spirit are coordinated as two named terms, not glossed as one, and everything around the sentence is dripping with actual baptism: John baptizing in chapter 1, the Baptist's water-and-Spirit contrast, and, decisively, the verse your group just discovered: the Lord walks out of this conversation and baptizes. When an evangelist frames a saying about water-birth with baptisms on both sides of it, the burden of proof belongs to the reading that evaporates the water.

And the anachronism objection mistakes what Jesus expects of Nicodemus. He is not rebuked for failing to foresee the font; he is rebuked, as a teacher of Israel, for not recognizing Ezekiel's promise of water-and-Spirit renewal when its restatement stood in front of him. What Nicodemus could know is exactly what Jesus faults him for missing. And the Lord regularly spoke words whose full referent arrived later: destroy this temple; the bread I shall give is my flesh; this sentence too was spoken forward, and John wrote it down for a Church that, from her earliest surviving explanation of Baptism (St. Justin, in the mid-second century), heard in it exactly one thing. Add the weight the group can now feel behind it: a reading ancient, widespread, and constant: from Justin through the Fathers cited tonight into the Catechism, which says this sacrament *signifies and actually brings about* the birth of water and the Spirit. The Church did not force a rite into the verse. She was born from people who watched the verse's Speaker baptize, and never forgot what he meant.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: follow Nicodemus out of chapter 3. Read John 7:50–51 (he risks a procedural defense of Jesus before his peers) and John 19:39 (he comes with Joseph of Arimathea, carrying about a hundred pounds' weight of myrrh and aloes, to bury the Lord openly). Ask: what does John want us to learn from a disciple whose growth took years and whose boldest act came at the darkest hour? And notice where his arc ends: at the cross, with the body of Jesus, exactly where this study is headed in two weeks.

Send • out of the room

QS1. Birth is the one thing no one achieves. Where are you still trying to earn what can only be received, and what would receiving look like this week?

QS2. Nicodemus moved from night, to a nervous question in a meeting, to public devotion at the cross. Which stage are you honestly at, and what is the next smallest step into daylight?

Live It This Week

- Memorize John 3:5 completely this week; it is the study's namesake and the shortest summary of everything we have traced.
- Pray for one Nicodemus you know by name: someone circling the faith cautiously, at night. Ask for the chance to be safe daylight for them.
- Read the whole Nicodemus arc in one sitting (John 3:1–21; 7:45–52; 19:38–42) and write one sentence about what changed him.

Memory Verse

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

John 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, in one sentence your Son gave us the door: born of water and the Spirit. Thank you for every week it took to hear it. For the unbaptized we love, open the way; for the baptized who have wandered, renew them in the grace of their birth; and for each of us, let the birth we received become the life we live. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

John 3:1–15 • The night conversation; verses 3, 4, 5, 10 carry the session

2 Kings 5:14 • Callback: Naaman answers Nicodemus's question in advance

Ezekiel 36:25–27 • Callback: what the teacher of Israel should have recognized

John 3:22; 4:1–2 • Live discovery: fresh from the sentence, Jesus baptizes

John 7:38–39 • Steelman: living water glossed as the Spirit; weighed and answered

John 3:14–15 • Planted: lifted up like the serpent (Session 12)

John 7:50–51; 19:38–42 • Dig Deeper: the Nicodemus arc