

What Do You Seek?

Session 5: Born Again at Night

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers how the saving act reaches an individual person: grace arriving first, faith that looks and lives, new birth in water and the Spirit, and a free coming-to-the-light that God invites and never forces. They also discover that John's Gospel gives the slow seeker explicit permission to move slowly, in the person of Nicodemus himself.

Catholic Touchstone: God's free initiative demands man's free response (CCC 2002): the whole frame of this study, stated by the Catechism in seven words.

The Knock and the Door: Piece Five

This week's piece, in one sentence: What Christ did on the cross is offered to each person as a gift: received by grace, through faith, in a new birth of water and the Spirit, and it can be received slowly.

This is the week the study says plainly, and without pressure, what Catholics believe about how salvation is applied: grace first, faith that receives, baptism as the new birth Jesus names, and a whole life of coming to the light. Present it as an open door, not a turnstile. The steelman handles the honest edges, including last week's thief, who reached Paradise with no baptism recorded.

What You Need to Know

Nicodemus is the most credentialed man to approach Jesus in John's Gospel: a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, "the teacher of Israel" (Jn 3:10). And he comes by night. Read that both ways at once: caution about being seen, and the honest hour when the big questions actually come. Every seeker in your room knows the 2 a.m. version of themselves; Nicodemus is that self, walking to the source.

He opens with a diplomat's compliment; Jesus answers the question underneath it: "unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). The Greek *anōthen* means both "anew" and "from above," and John means the pun: a fresh start whose source is not us. Nicodemus takes it comically literally (a grown man entering the womb again), and Jesus specifies: "born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). The Church from the earliest centuries has heard baptism in that phrase; the Catechism cites this very verse (CCC 1257). Say so honestly as what Catholics believe, and let the imagery keep its welcome: birth is not an achievement; nobody births themselves. The metaphor itself carries the doctrine of grace.

Then Jesus reaches for a strange old story: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-15). The group finds Numbers 21 live: the bitten looked at the raised image and lived. Faith, in Jesus' own chosen picture, is a wound turning its gaze to the remedy. Then the sentence the whole Gospel funnels through: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16), with 3:17 guarding its tone: sent not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.

Verses 19-21 give the free-will edge in door-and-light language: “the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.” The light arrives on its own initiative; coming to it, or not, remains ours. Do not press the point; the frame gets named next week.

Finally, the arc almost no one notices: John tracks Nicodemus across the whole Gospel. In John 7:50-51 he risks a procedural defense of Jesus before his peers. In John 19:39 he appears at the most dangerous possible moment, after the crucifixion, carrying about a hundred pounds of burial spices: an extravagant act of devotion, and since the burial had to be finished before the Sabbath began at sundown (Jn 19:31, 42), the man who once came by night now works in the light of day. John never records his confession; John records his trajectory. The slow yes is a real yes.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Numbers 21:4-9. The bronze serpent: the bitten look at the lifted image of the very thing that wounded them, and live. Jesus Himself selects this as the picture of the cross and of faith. The group finds it live.

Ezekiel 36:25-27. “I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.” The prophets already pair water and Spirit for the remaking of a person; this is the background the teacher of Israel was expected to hear (Jn 3:10). Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Justin Martyr *First Apology (summary, c. AD 155)*

Describing Christian initiation to a pagan emperor in the mid-second century, little more than a century after the resurrection, Justin explains that converts are brought to water and reborn, and he cites Christ's own words that without this new birth one cannot enter the kingdom. He calls baptism illumination: the newly born receive light. A faithful summary of chapter 61.

St. Cyprian of Carthage *To Donatus (summary, c. AD 246)*

Cyprian describes his own adult conversion from the inside: what he thought impossible beforehand, a genuinely new start for a man already formed by his habits, he found actually happening in the water of rebirth; doubts settling, light entering, a second birth making a new man. One of antiquity's great before-and-after testimonies, summarized.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus *Oration 40, On Baptism (summary)*

Preaching in the fourth century, Gregory pours out names for baptism: gift, grace, illumination, garment of incorruption, bath of rebirth, seal. The pile of images makes one point: this is something received, not achieved; the vocabulary of baptism is the vocabulary of gift. A faithful summary.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1996:** grace defined: favor, the free and undeserved help God gives us to respond to His call.
- **CCC 1257:** the Lord affirms baptism's necessity in this very verse (Jn 3:5); and, in the same paragraph, the honest breadth: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments.
- **CCC 2001: even the free response is prepared and carried by grace; our collaboration never precedes His initiative.**
- **CCC 2002:** God's free initiative demands man's free response: the study's frame, in the Church's own words.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Your friend may be Nicodemus tonight: the real questions come privately, after, on the walk to the car or in a text the next morning. Be findable. Linger at the end; be the last to leave the parking lot. Whatever they ask you privately stays private; nothing is more corrosive than hearing your after-hours question repeated to the group as an anecdote. Two specific cautions: never ask anyone “have you been baptized” in front of the room, and if your friend was baptized long ago and has been away since, tonight's texts are not a club; the Church reads that baptism as still real, a seal not undone by wandering. And hand them Nicodemus's timeline explicitly if they seem to need it: John gives the slow yes three chapters and never once scolds it.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** Nicodemus speaks first, and it is no exception: he comes because of the signs (Jn 3:2); the knock preceded the visit. Log it for the arc-trace.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** a night arrival at a threshold, and the session ends with light and the free coming-to-it (3:19-21). Protect; do not connect.
- **Next week is the finale:** confirm every participant still has their Week 1 sealed sheet. Send the reminder mid-week, cheerfully, without explaining why.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Five: the gift and how it is received: grace, faith, new birth of water and Spirit, and the freedom to come to the light.
2. Walk John 3:1-21 inductively, keeping the birth imagery doing its own work: nobody births themselves.
3. Land the live discovery in Numbers 21: faith as the wound looking at the remedy.
4. Steelman the objection to ritual at full strength and answer it, including the good thief honestly.
5. Surface Nicodemus's full arc so every slow seeker in the room hears the permission John gives them.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the Numbers 21 discovery or the arc reveal; they carry the session.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, some of us are here in broad daylight and some of us are here at night, and you receive both. Meet us at whatever hour we have actually arrived. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Five: How the Gift Arrives

“Four pieces so far: made for God; a real wall; the answer is a person; and on the cross He paid for the wall in person. Tonight the piece everything has been waiting for: how does what happened on that hill two thousand years ago reach you, here, now? The Christian answer has a shape, and the shape is a gift. It starts on God's side, always, which is why the word is grace: undeserved, unearned, offered first. It is received by faith, which tonight's story will define better than any dictionary: a wound turning to look at the remedy. And Jesus names a doorway for it: being born again, of water and the Spirit, which Catholics have always understood as baptism, a birth, and notice what that image rules out: nobody has ever birthed themselves. The whole thing is receivable, not achievable. One more thing, and then the story: it can be received slowly. Watch the man who comes tonight with his questions in the dark, and where he ends up.”

Win

Markus Persson sold Minecraft for 2.5 billion dollars, and then posted from the far side of the finish line that hanging out in Ibiza, partying with famous people, able to do anything he wanted, he had never felt more isolated. The jackpot arrived; the new life did not.

1. If you could genuinely start over, a full reset with everything you now know, what would you do differently, and what makes you sure the reset would take?
2. Why do resolutions, reinventions, and fresh starts so often collapse back into the same person?

Build

Read John 3:1-8 aloud.

1. Verse 2: what do we know about who Nicodemus is, and what do you make of the hour he chooses? Is coming at night cowardice, wisdom, or something else?
2. Jesus says a person must be “born anew” to see the kingdom. Of all the images He could have chosen for starting over, why birth? What can you contribute to your own birth?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He is the establishment in one man: Pharisee, ruler, the teacher of Israel, and he comes in the dark, part caution, part honesty; night is when the real questions surface, and he takes his to the source, which is more than most of his peers ever did. And the birth image is doing doctrine: nobody attends their own birth as a contributor. A reset you perform on yourself is a renovation; what Jesus offers is a nativity, sourced from above (the Greek *anōthen* means both anew and from above; John intends the pun). The gift-shape of the whole thing is inside the metaphor before any theology is stated.

Read John 3:9-17 aloud.

3. Jesus specifies: “born of water and the Spirit” (v. 5), and then reaches for a story from the wilderness (vv. 14-15). Let’s find the story He is pointing at.

Live discovery: *have the group find Numbers 21:4-9 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

In Numbers 21 the bitten are dying of venom already in the bloodstream; the cure is not a task but a look: gaze at the lifted image and live. Jesus makes it His own diagram of the cross: “so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Faith, in His chosen picture, is not intellectual box-checking or moral achievement; it is the wound turning its eyes to the remedy. Then verses 16-17 give the engine behind it all: God so loved that He gave, and the Son was sent not to condemn the world but to save it. On the water: the Church has heard baptism in verse 5 from its first centuries, the new birth given a doorway; that is what Catholics believe, offered here as exactly that, and the birth image keeps it honest: a gift received, never a merit badge earned.

Read John 3:19-21 aloud.

4. “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.” Notice who moves first, and notice what remains free. What do these verses say about how God treats human freedom?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The light arrives on its own initiative; nobody summoned it. And yet the verses speak of loving darkness, of coming or not coming to the light: the arrival is God’s, the approach is ours, though even our approaching is carried by grace; the Catechism says the very preparation of man for grace is already a work of grace (CCC 2001), and John states both without embarrassment. God, apparently, wants sons and daughters, not conscripts; a love that was compelled would not be love. Hold the thought; it has one more session to grow.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength: “Water is water. A ritual cannot change anything real, and making salvation depend on a ceremony is arbitrary gatekeeping; what about everyone who never gets the ceremony?” Take the pieces in order. First, humans are not ghosts; we are bodies, and every serious human bond runs through physical acts that really change states: a signature makes a marriage or a citizenship, a handshake seals what words alone could not, and nobody calls a wedding ring arbitrary. A God who became flesh meeting embodied creatures through matter is not magic; it is consistency. Second, the Church’s own teaching carries the honest breadth the objection demands: God has bound salvation to baptism, and He Himself is not bound by His sacraments (CCC 1257). Exhibit A hung beside Jesus last week: the thief reached Paradise with no baptism recorded, no ceremony, nothing but a dying man’s plea of faith. The ordinary door is not the only door the Owner can open; but when the Owner has told you where the door is, walking toward it is not superstition. It is taking Him at His word.

Dig Deeper (optional)

John never records Nicodemus converting. He records something better: a trajectory. In John 7:50-51 the night visitor risks a procedural objection in Jesus’ defense before his own colleagues, and absorbs their sneer. In John 19:39, after the crucifixion, when association with Jesus is most dangerous, Nicodemus comes carrying about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes: a royal quantity, an extravagant, costly yes; and since the burial had to be done before sundown (Jn 19:42), the night visitor is now handling the body of Jesus in daylight. Three chapters, no scolding, one slow arrival. If anyone in this room needed permission to move at Nicodemus speed, the Gospel of John just gave it.

Send

3. “A wound turning to look at the remedy.” Where does that picture of faith sit with you, compared with the definitions of faith you grew up hearing?
4. Nicodemus got years. What would the next honest step look like at your speed, whatever your speed is?

Live It This Week

1. Find your Week 1 sheet and make sure you know where it is. Bring it next week, still folded. This is the only prep the final session needs.
2. Reread John 3:16-17 once, slowly, substituting nothing and adding nothing. Just let it say what it says.
3. Optional: next week we go back to the very beginning of the story. No advance reading; come as you are.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “God, some of us are at noon and some of us are at midnight, and you have never once turned away a night visitor. Give each of us the next step at our own honest speed. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 5, and repeat the one piece of homework aloud: find your Week 1 sheet, keep it folded, bring it next week.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- John 3:1-21, the night visit, born anew, water and the Spirit, the serpent lifted, God so loved, light and freedom

Live Discovery Text

- Numbers 21:4-9, the bronze serpent: look and live

Supporting Texts

- Ezekiel 36:25-27, clean water, new heart, new spirit (leader background)
- John 7:50-51 and John 19:39, the Nicodemus arc (Dig Deeper)
- Luke 23:39-43, recalled: the thief and the honest breadth of mercy (steelman)

Catechism

- CCC 1996, 1257, 2001, 2002

Memory Verse

- John 3:16

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Five: grace, faith, new birth of water and Spirit, the free coming to the light; sealed-sheet reminder issued