



Discussion Guide

Grace: John 3.16-21

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- o Complete the following statement: "I feel loved when. . ."
- o Optional: What, if anything from the sermon, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

Setting the Stage: *Bent. Broken. Out of place, with no hope of experiencing life in any other way. This is the reality of life as we know it. However, it is a reality that can change for it is a reality that God sought to change. Seeing us in a desperate state, God, impassioned with love, threw Himself into our dilemma, offering to do for us what we could not do on our own. He offered a way back, a way back to life the way it was meant to be. God's action on our behalf was nothing we earned, nothing we deserved. It was something He offered freely to those who would but turn to Him. That's just the trouble, really. Am I willing to turn to Him?*

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read John 3.16-21. (*Leader tip: You may want to provide context for this passage using John 3.1-15 and the Context and Background notes.*)
- In what ways did God show His love for the world? (*Look down through the text to draw out as many answers as possible. Take time and look for explicit and implicit ways in the text.*)
- Considering *The Story* to this point, what, if anything, makes God's actions unusual? What do these actions tell us about who God is, really?
- We see two responses to God's love, running to Him in faith and running away in fear. What might lie behind these two responses? What are the diverging results? (*You might consider focusing on drawing out implications for today.*)
- How do people view God? Does their image fit with the character of God revealed in the text? Can you elaborate?
- Can we break down people's response to God as Jesus does? How might people's view of God influence their response?
- How do you typically respond to God? Do you see a connection between your response and your view of God?
- Consider for a moment that God is completely good and loving, and that this good and loving God has moved graciously to provide His intended life today. What would it take for you to run to God in faith in your daily life? What steps might you be willing to take to move toward this way of being?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- o Prayer requests
- o Group prayer time
- o House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)

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Group Notes

Grace: Discussion Guide

John 3.16-21

Context and Background

A conversation at night: The words of John 3.16-21 are the conclusion of a conversation that occurred at night between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus was a religious leader (Pharisee) and came to Jesus to discuss the nature of Jesus' ministry and identity. More than likely, Nicodemus came at night to avoid any appearance of being a disciple of Jesus, an appearance that could stain his standing in the community. While Nicodemus wished to discuss Jesus' identity and ministry, Jesus turned the conversation back on Nicodemus, pointing out Nicodemus' misunderstanding of God's work. The work of God, according to Jesus, was to make people alive for a second time, an experience Jesus called being "born again," something that led to the possession of eternal life.

Belief (Faith): The words translated "believe" throughout John 3.16-21 are actually cognates of the word "faith" in the language of the New Testament. The word "believe" and its cognates are used in translation as the English language does not have a word that directly equates with the Greek words used. Because of this, one should not assume that our modern use of "believe" is functionally equivalent to John's use of "faith" in the passage. For us, "to believe" is often equated with mental assent to a body of facts, an assent that does not necessarily lead to practical implications in our lives. However, the word "faith" and its cognates bear a deeper meaning. To speak of "having faith" in religious contexts in the ancient world was at a minimum used to refer to a conviction that led to an ordering of life (pagan religions) and at most to the complete abandonment of one's life to a god for their protection and provision (mystery religions). In the Old Testament, to "have faith" meant to live out a trust in God with a focus on future results (Hab. 2.3-4 and Is. 7.9). As one can see, faith in the ancient world involved not only mental assent but conviction that led to practical action in one's life. In the New Testament, themes from these threads are seen. The call to faith (to believe) was central both to the teaching of Jesus and the preaching/writing of his followers (Mk 1.14-15, 2.5; Matt. 8.10). In the Gospels, when Jesus called for faith (belief), he was calling for people to trust in him for their deliverance, both in the present and the future. This trust was none other than a complete orientation of one's life around him, an abandonment of one's self to Jesus as the one who would provide and protect. We see this meaning in John's Gospel, particularly in the present passage. Jesus states that rescue and eternal life are available in the present to those who "believe in his name." That is, those that abandon themselves to him find both deliverance and provision, in the present with future implications. However, we also see that such faith leads to real life implications, outworkings that change how one lives and not just what they believe (Jn 3.21).

Connecting the dots of *The Story*: At this point in the story we have seen that people are by nature utterly rebellious. Our bent away from God is so strong that we are unable to turn back to God and live rightly even though God has shown us what living rightly involves in the Law. On our own, we cannot find our way back to Eden, back to the life God created us to experience. Therefore, God steps in to do what we cannot do on our own. God enters His creation in the person of Jesus for the purpose of taking upon himself the suffering and sorrow we have brought about through our rebellion. In a sacrificial act of dying in our place, God absorbs into Himself the consequences of our living as our own gods. He does this as a gracious act on our behalf, something we did not nor could not earn. Rather, God acts out of His deep compassion and love for His creation, reaching out to do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

The Text

The Father's Love (John 3.16-18): The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus concludes with an explanation of the means by which and motivation for the movement of God, a movement that makes eternal life available to people who are by nature bent away from God. Eternal life is another way of referring to life as it was meant to be, creation life. This eternal/creation life is made available for people to experience in the present. John uses present tense verbs indicating eternal life is something we can have now, not something we have to wait for. God's actions are motivated by love, a love for the world that is so intense that it motivates God to act. The phrasing here indicates intense emotion that can only lead to action. This action to bring eternal life is done through the sending of God's only Son into the world. Those who choose to place their faith in the Son can, in the present, experience life as God meant it to be lived (See *Belief*). The mission of the Son was not to condemn the world as the world already stands condemned and in need of someone to rescue it. Rather, the Son came to rescue the world, to save it from its fallen/condemned state. This rescue becomes reality as people respond in faith. However, those who refuse to respond to God's overtures of love in faith find that they remain in their condemned/fallen state with no hope of rescue. The only hope of rescue comes in a willingness to turn back to God and experience His rescue. Life as God meant it is only available as something received, received as one abandon's himself to God.

The Children's Choice (John 3.19-21): The reality is that turning to God is difficult, something that is not natural for a world in need of rescue. The reality/verdict is that light has come into the world but people are drawn to darkness because of their broken/evil nature. The use of light and darkness is common in John and in Jewish writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is a common way of speaking symbolically of right and wrong or God's way and rebellion. People are bent and broken (evil). They fear responding in faith (coming into the light). The reason is that they are afraid of the outcome of a faith response, being known and seen by God for who they are (Jn 3.20). Shame and fear of being known hold people back. Interestingly, it is shame and fear that first caused people to turn away from God (Gen. 3.8-10). What lies behind such fear is a matter of speculation, but one might imagine a fear of reproach and punishment by God coupled with shame over one's fallen state (nakedness as in Gen 3.10?) before God. However, such shame and fear is misplaced as God is not reaching to people in judgment but in love with the desire for restoration (Jn 3.16). How one shifts from this state of fear to one of faith is not stated. However, the effect of such a shift is the stepping toward God to be known by Him and others (Jn 3.21). Basically, a faith response leads to stepping back to Eden, to a state of being known by God and others as we are, those loved by God.

Application: Broken. Out of place. Condemned by our actions and bent. This is the state in which we find ourselves with no hope for any other path by our own means. Finding us in this state, God's love motivated Him to engage in a mission of rescue in the person of Jesus, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, to bring us back to His intended life in the person of Jesus. Because of this gracious act, and in this act alone, we can find wholeness. We can be known by God and others. We can experience life as it was meant to be.