



## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

#### LOST IN CHURCH

*John 3:1–21*

##### I. Can human nature be changed?

###### A. This is a **deep** question.

Most attempts to define human identity and explain human behavior seem to focus on two unchangeable realities that seem to be determinative:

1. Our **genetic code** (nature). Not just the color of our eyes and the size of our feet, but what we like, what we desire, how we react to danger, what skills we excel in, etc. These all seem to be predetermined by our chromosomes.
2. Our **environment** (nurture). Our parents, our socio-economic culture, and events that happened to us during our formative years (war, abuse, illness, etc.) all have a profound influence in determining who we are.

Conclusion. Nature + nurture = **destiny**. With effort, we may be able to **modify** our behavior and make incremental improvements, but changing our nature? Such a thought is preposterous. Right?

###### B. This is a **contemporary** question.

Postmodern culture is quick to look to nature/nurture to explain human behavior. “I was born this way.” “He was abused as a child.” “She has a disorder (illness, chemical imbalance, syndrome, etc.).” “My parents were divorced.” “She is from a minority group.” Conclusion: We are not accountable for our actions; we are **programmed** this way. Change is impossible.

The last chapter of C. S. Lewis’ book *The Abolition of Man* is entitled “Men without Chests.” Here Lewis describes the chest as the “liaison officer” between the head (intellect) and the belly (appetites). If man was pure intellect (the head), he would be a spirit. If he were pure appetite (the belly), he would be an animal. It is the chest that makes the head and the belly work properly; it makes man, man. Our educational system has produced men without chests. Yet we continue to demand from men the very qualities (honor, character, self-sacrifice, etc.) we have rendered impossible. We have removed the organ and yet demand the function. We have laughed at honor but are shocked when we find traitors in our midst!

###### C. This is a **biblical** question.

1. On several occasions, the Bible asks the question and seems to leave the answer dangling.
  - “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer 13:23).
  - “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done [with the clay]?” (Jer 18:6).
  - “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).
2. More to the point, this is the question that burned in the soul of Nicodemus when Jesus told him that he must be born again: “How can a man be born when he is old?” (Jn 3:4). Can human nature be changed—in a Pharisee?

II. John 3:1–21. Notes on the text.

<p>You must be <b>born again!</b></p> <p>Without a work of the Spirit you can't even see the Kingdom, much less enter in.</p> <p>Jn 3:1–8</p>	<p>Why can't you <b>understand</b> this?</p> <p>Religious activity is only behavior modification. Look and live!</p> <p>Jn 3:9–15</p>	<p>The Son of God has come as light in a world of darkness.</p> <p>You will be saved or condemned depending on how you <b>respond</b>.</p> <p>Jn 3:16–21</p>
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A. In John 4, Jesus will invite a known **sinner** to change. But in John 3, Jesus is offering life to a very good man. It is instructive to highlight the **contrast**:

Nicodemus	Woman at the Well
A Jew	A Samaritan
A <b>man</b>	A woman
An orthodox Pharisee	A member of <b>a cult</b>
In Jerusalem	In Samaria
A <b>moral</b> man	An immoral woman
Initiated by Nicodemus	Initiated by Jesus
He is curious	She is <b>thirsty</b>
Not sure of the outcome	She came to <b>radiant faith</b>

B. The word used to describe birth (*anōthen*) can be translated either born “again” or born **“from above”**. Both renderings fit the context.

C. The text gives a lot of information about Nicodemus.

1. He was a **sincere** Pharisee (Jn 3:1). He is no hypocrite.
2. He was a **ruler** of the Jews (Jn 3:1); probably a member of the Sanhedrin.
3. He was **curious** to know more about Jesus (Jn 3:2). His interest was based on the signs (miracles) Jesus had done (see Jn 2:23–25).
4. He was a **teacher** (Jn 3:10); perhaps a theologian, a seminary professor. He was a serious student of the Scriptures.
5. He was **rich**. We know this because of the large amount of spices (75 pounds of myrrh and aloes) that he offered in burying Jesus (Jn 3:19:39).
6. He came to see Jesus at **night** (Jn 3:2) probably to avoid being seen. Was he embarrassed? Afraid? Ashamed? In John’s Gospel, night is often symbolic of ignorance, spiritual darkness and sin (see Jn 13:30).
7. He seems to have come to faith in Jesus, but his testimony is somewhat **foggy** and the outcome less than clear:
  - He stands up for Jesus before his colleagues by reminding them that no one should be judged without a trial (Jn 7:50–52).
  - Like Joseph of Arimathea, he was a secret disciple. After Jesus died, he brought spices to prepare for burial (Jn 19:38–39).

D. The new birth Jesus is talking about is “of **water** and the Spirit.” Some think water refers to natural birth (as when a woman’s water breaks). Others think it refers to cleansing. Probably it is a reference to **baptism**; the kind of pre-Christian baptism

practiced by John the Baptist (Jn 1:31–34; 3:22–23). In other words, Jesus is telling the Rt. Rev. Dr. Nicodemus: “Unless you have submitted to the ministry of John the Baptist and been dunked under water as a sign of repentance for your sins, you couldn’t see the kingdom of God if it were staring you in the face!”

- E. When Jesus speaks of being “**lifted up**” (Jn 3:14), he speaks with double entendre. On the one hand, the word means “exalted,” “elevated in glory,” “lifted high in royal majesty.” On the other hand, he is talking about **the cross**. Both meanings are true at the same time! See also John 8:28; 12:32; etc.
- F. In his conversation with Nicodemus about **inner transformation**, Jesus seems to allude to three important passages of Scripture from the Old Testament:

1. In speaking about water and the need for a new beginning (Jn 3:5–7), Jesus was surely making an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25–27.

*I will sprinkle clean **water** on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a **new heart**, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

2. In speaking about new life brought about by the **Spirit/wind/breath** (Jn 3:8), Jesus was surely making an allusion to Ezekiel 37:1–14.

*The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he . . . set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. . . . Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord . . . And as I prophesied, there was a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no **breath [Spirit, wind]** in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may **live**.” So I prophesied and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. . . .*

3. Whereas the allusions to the passages from Ezekiel were indirect, Jesus made sure that the reference to Numbers 21:4–9 was direct and unavoidable (Jn 3:14).

*Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned... Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it **on a pole**, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would **look** at the bronze serpent and **live**.*

### III. How can I experience deep change and be born again?

The Gospel is emphatic: human nature can be **changed**! The leopard *can* change his spots! But *only* by an operation of God’s Spirit working deep in the human heart; *never* by

human effort! Jesus did not come to help us modify our behavior. He came to raise us from the dead! He came to transform the very core of our (twisted) being:

- “Be **transformed** [metamorphosed] by the renewal of your mind. . .” (Rom 12:2).
- “If anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (II Cor 5:17).
- “You have put on the **new man**, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col 3:10).
- “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of **regeneration** and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Ti 3:5).
- “So that you may become partakers of the **divine nature**. . .” (II Pt 1:4).

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus shows us how such an inner transformation becomes a reality; not just for immoral Samaritans (John 4) but for moral, orthodox, pious worshippers like Nicodemus.

A. **Admit** my need.

This may be the hardest step. It takes **humility** to acknowledge that all my righteous deeds are no more than **filthy rags** (Is 64:6). It's not just the murderers, thieves, and sexual perverts that need the new birth. It's church-going, Bible-believing, traditional-values, law-abiding people like us! It all begins when we as individuals **confess** our sin and poverty of spirit and come to Jesus.

B. **Believe** in Jesus.

When we realize we've been bitten by the serpent of sin and will die from the poison, there is only one remedy: **look** and live. “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). “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

C. **Receive** the gift.

God so loved the world that he **gave** his only Son. “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (I Jn 5:12). There is nothing we can do to earn this life or purchase it by our good works. It is a gift, free and undeserved. “But to all who did **receive** him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). New life is not dependent on what we do but on what he has already done!

D. **Love** the Light.

The offer of free salvation includes a **warning**. Many today think that faith in Jesus is **passive** and that receiving the gift of salvation has little or no impact on behavior. This is not just bad theology, it can lead to **self-deception** (lost in church). To believe in Jesus and receive the gift of life means that now we are finally able to turn from the darkness and walk in the light. “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world. . .” (Jn 3:19). Jesus' coming **divides** the world into two groups: those who love the light and those who hate the light (Jn 3:19–21). To pretend to believe in Jesus yet continue to willfully walk in darkness is to be deceived.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Has this lesson affected how you answer the question “Can human nature be changed?” How?
2. Describe what it means to be “lost in church.” How is this similar to being lost outside of church? How is it different?
3. Using this passage of Scripture, describe how deep inner change comes to a person.
4. Without using names, describe someone you know who hates the light. Now describe someone you know who loves the light.

## Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin

By Charles Wesley<sup>1</sup>

*Where shall my wondering soul begin?  
How shall I all to heaven aspire?  
A slave redeemed from death and sin,  
A brand plucked from eternal fire,  
How shall I equal triumphs raise,  
And sing my great deliverer's praise?*

*O how shall I the goodness tell,  
Father, which thou to me hast showed?  
That I, a child of wrath and hell,  
I should be called a child of God!  
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,  
Blest with this antepast of heaven!*

*Outcasts of men, to you I call,  
Harlots and publicans and thieves;  
He spreads his arms to embrace you all,  
Sinners alone his grace receive.  
No need of him the righteous have;  
He came the lost to seek and save.*

*Come, O my guilty brethren, come,  
Groaning beneath your load of sin;  
His bleeding heart shall make you room,  
His open side shall take you in.  
He calls you now, invites you home:  
Come, O my guilty brethren, come.*

*For you the purple current flowed  
In pardon from his wounded side,  
Languished for you the eternal God,  
For you the Prince of Glory died.  
Believe, and all your guilt's forgiven,  
Only believe—and yours is heaven.*

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<sup>1</sup> This is generally thought to be the hymn Charles Wesley wrote shortly after his conversion (May 21, 1738, Pentecost Sunday). When his brother John was also converted three days later, it is believed that this is the hymn they sang together. Charles writes in his journal: “Towards ten, my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends, and declared, “I believe.” We sang the hymn with great joy and parted with prayer.”