

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. What do you think makes for a good life and what do you think happens after death?

Read John 3:1-21

2. Why might a man like Nicodemus have come to Jesus at night and might John have any other reason for highlighting this fact (given his use of the imagery of darkness later in the passage)?
3. What was it that drew Nicodemus to come and see Jesus? What did he understand about God's way of working and what, as the conversation unfolds, did he not understand yet?
4. What does this passage tell us about why people need to be born again and how it happens?
5. Verse 14 contains a reference to an event in the Old Testament. Read Numbers 21:4-9. How do these events serve as a useful illustration for Jesus of His mission?
6. Verse 16 is often said to be a summary of the message of the Bible. Reading the verse, do you agree with this assessment?
7. Why did some people reject Jesus (and some still do) when He did not come to condemn people but to bring salvation for people (verses 17-21)?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Do you ever feel like you are heavily burdened in life and that you would like to find rest somewhere? Do you think taking Jesus' yoke on you (accepting Him as Lord) might be the answer (Matthew 11:29-30)?
- Does Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow Him sound too demanding to you? What would you say to His claim that rejecting Him for something else means losing your soul (Matthew 16:26)?
- Jesus spoke as if having a secure hope for the future beyond death could give us peace in this life and motivate us to become better people. Does that make sense to you?
- What does Jesus' choice of the twelve apostles say about the kind of people He cares for? Could you imagine Him calling you to follow and what would you say in response?
- John 3 claims that we need a new life from the Spirit of God and that this is only possible because of Jesus' death, but warns that people prefer darkness to light. Does this challenge you in any way?

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 12 – JESUS' MISSION

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is an apostle?

The word 'apostle' is a transliteration of a New Testament Greek word *apostolos*. The word's root meaning is 'sent one' and some people use it or the adjective 'apostolic' to refer to people sent on Christian mission. Others point to apostles' role laying foundations for the Church or guiding its leaders and suggest that people who initiate churches today are doing 'apostolic' work or there can be modern apostles over churches. As with any word, however, the meaning cannot be reliably determined based on etymology alone. Importantly, apostle does not simply mean someone sent with a message, but an authorised representative, something like an ambassador who speaks with the full authority of the country that appoints him, accountable to its rulers.

The New Testament only describes as 'apostles' men who were personally appointed by Jesus to the role and who had known Him, heard His teachings and witnessed His resurrection (see Acts 1:21–26; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:7). These people were clearly confined to the first generation of Christians, so it is not helpful to speak of modern apostles or apostolic ministries. The later books of the New Testament indicate that the time of the apostles was passing away and that future generations of Christians must remain faithful to the foundational teachings they had laid down (2 Peter 3:2; Jude 1:17).

Was Jesus' mission entirely about eternal life in Heaven and not about social change?

Some writers about Jesus describe Him as a social reformer who taught people to love one another and envisioned a society of equality and fairness. This is not wrong, but it misses the ultimate point of Jesus' life and mission. Jesus did teach love for others and He exemplified this in His own life. In this study I have majored on words from John's Gospel which explain Jesus' mission in terms of bringing eternal life to people. In responding to this question, it is important to look also at Luke's Gospel, which has a distinct emphasis.

The praises of Mary before His birth (Luke 1:46-55; see Part 9) describe His mission in terms of overthrowing oppressors and satisfying the poor and hungry. One of Jesus' first messages in public quoted Isaiah 61 to explain His mission "to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come (Luke 4:18-19). The important point is that these statements must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. His ministry was almost entirely within Israel and He challenged them (especially the most religious) for their neglect of God's Law, or rather their partial obedience to it. He continued the message of the Old Testament prophets that Israel had not been faithful to God's covenant and Law. This was especially evident in the attention some people paid to details of the Law concerning their own actions without showing compassion to others. Rather than loving their neighbours, some religious Jews condemned them while they took pride in themselves. Jesus exposes this hypocrisy and comes to restore the Old Testament principles of fairness and justice. The reference in Luke 4 to the "time of the Lord's favour" is to Leviticus 25 and the Year of Jubilee, when slaves were to be released and debts cancelled. Israel was meant to be a just society but failed.

Importantly, the Old Testament shows that the reason for Israel's unfaithfulness was deeper than simply ignorance of or inattention to God's Law. The real problem was their stubborn, rebellious hearts. They were sinful and until sin could be dealt with there was no hope of a perfect future when people would obey God's standards. Jesus began to form a new people of God (a renewed Israel) around Himself (the twelve are the start of this). Zechariah's words of praise, that follow Mary's, said Jesus had come to make possible forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77). At the end of Luke's Gospel (which the passages about Jesus' mission to reform society come from), Jesus tells His disciples their message must be about the forgiveness of sins through repentance (Luke 24:47). This is the message they preach in Luke's sequel, the book of Acts.

Jesus did envision a transformed society, but He knew that this was only possible through the transformation of individual people. We can (and should) change social structures and laws to promote justice, but we cannot solve the problem of the human heart. Only God can do that. The Church is the place where God's transformed society is supposed to be seen because it is a community of people whose lives are being changed by God as they repent of sin and experience God's forgiveness.