



SAINTS

ENJOYING A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS
WHEN YOU'RE DISILLUSIONED WITH RELIGION

KAT ARMSTRONG

STORYLINE

I'm convinced that the Bible is somehow powerfully simple and beautifully complex. Like a diamond viewed from different angles, Scripture continually confronts my heart in fresh ways. This Bible-study series offers insightful perspectives and gives its participants a refreshing opportunity to admire the character of God and be transformed by the truth of his Word. Our souls need to meander through the minutiae and metanarrative of the Bible, and the **Storyline Bible Studies** help us do both.

KYLE IDLEMAN, senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church and bestselling author of *Not a Fan* and *One at a Time*

If you are longing for a breath of fresh air in your spiritual life, this study is for you. Kat Armstrong brings to life both familiar and less familiar Bible stories in such an engaging way that you can't help but see how the God of the past is also working and moving in your present. Through the captivating truths revealed in this series, you will discover more about God's faithfulness, be equipped to move past fear and disappointment, and be empowered to be who you were created to be. If your faith has felt mundane or routine, these words will be a refreshing balm to your soul and a guide to go deeper in your relationship with God.

HOSANNA WONG, international speaker and bestselling author of *How (Not) to Save the World: The Truth about Revealing God's Love to the People Right Next to You*

We are watching a new wave of Bible studies that care about the Bible's big story, from Genesis to Revelation; that plunge Bible readers into the depths of human despair and show them the glories of the Kingdom God plans for creation; and that invite readers to participate in that story in all its dimensions—in the mountains and the valleys. Anyone who ponders these Bible studies will come to terms not only with the storyline of the Bible but also with where each of us fits in God's grand narrative. I heartily commend Kat's **Storyline Bible Studies**.

REV. CANON DR. SCOT MCKNIGHT, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

Kat Armstrong is an able trail guide with contagious enthusiasm! In this series, she'll take you hiking through Scripture to experience mountains and valleys, sticks and stones, sinners and saints. If you are relatively new to the Bible or are struggling to see how it all fits together, your trek with Kat will be well worth it. You might even decide that hiking through the Bible is your new hobby.

CARMEN JOY IMES, associate professor of Old Testament at Biola University and author of *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters*

Kat Armstrong takes you into the heart of Scripture so that Scripture can grow in your heart. The **Storyline Bible Studies** have everything: the overarching story of God's redemption, the individual biblical story's historical context, and the text's interpretation that connects with today's realities. Armstrong asks insightful questions that make the Bible come alive and draws authentically on her own faith journey so that readers might deepen their relationship with Jesus. Beautifully written and accessible, the **Storyline Bible Studies** are a wonderful resource for individual or group study.

LYNN H. COHICK, PHD, provost and dean of academic affairs at Northern Seminary

Christians affirm that the Bible is God's Word and provides God's life-giving instruction and encouragement. But what good is such an authoritative and valuable text if God's people don't engage it to find the help the Scriptures provide? Here's where Kat Armstrong's studies shine. In each volume, she presents Bible study as a journey through Scripture that can be transformational. In the process, she enables readers to see the overarching storyline of the Bible and to find their place in that story. In addition, Armstrong reinforces the essential steps that make Bible study life-giving for people seeking to grow in their faith. Whether for individuals, for small groups, or as part of a church curriculum, these studies are ideally suited to draw students into a fresh and invigorating engagement with God's Word.

WILLIAM W. KLEIN, PHD, professor emeritus of New Testament interpretation and author of *Handbook for Personal Bible Study: Enriching Your Experience with God's Word*

Kat has done two things that I love. She's taken something that is familiar and presented it in a fresh way that is understandable by all, balancing the profound with accessibility. And her trustworthy and constant approach to Bible study equips the participant to emerge from this study with the ability to keep studying and growing more.

MARTY SOLOMON, creator and executive producer of *The BEMA Podcast*

You are in for an adventure. In this series, Kat pulls back the curtain to reveal how intentionally God has woven together seemingly disconnected moments in the collective Bible story. Her delivery is both brilliant and approachable. She will invite you to be a curious sleuth as you navigate familiar passages of Scripture, discovering things you'd never seen before. I promise you will never read the living Word the same again.

JENN JETT BARRETT, founder and visionary of The Well Summit

Kat has done it again! The same wisdom, depth, humility, and authenticity that we have come to expect from her previous work is on full display here in her new **Storyline Bible Study** series. Kat is the perfect guide through these important themes and through the story of Scripture: gentle and generous on the one hand, capable and clear on the other. She is a gifted communicator and teacher of God's Word. The format of these studies is helpful too—perfect pacing, just the right amount of new information at each turn, with plenty of space for writing and prayerful reflection as you go and some great resources for further study. I love learning from Kat, and I'm sure you will too. Grab a few friends from your church or neighborhood and dig into these incredible resources together to find your imagination awakened and your faith strengthened.

DAN LOWERY, president of Pillar Seminary

Kat Armstrong possesses something I deeply admire: a sincere and abiding respect for the Bible. Her tenaciousness to know more about her beloved Christ, her commitment to truth telling, and her desire to dig until she mines the deepest gold for her Bible-study readers makes her one of my favorite Bible teachers. I find few that match her scriptural attentiveness and even fewer that embody her humble spirit. This project is stunning, like the rest of her work.

LISA WHITTLE, bestselling author of *Jesus over Everything: Uncomplicating the Daily Struggle to Put Jesus First*, Bible teacher, and podcast host



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For my dad, Ronald K. Obenhaus.

I think you would have loved this.

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A Message from Kat

“MY CONFIDENCE in Christian leaders is at an all-time low.”

My friend had called me to process the disillusionment that naturally follows seeing Christian leaders fall. And her words resonated with me. We are in a season filled with headlines that confirm the profound brokenness of celebrity Christianity, a system that dehumanizes the celebrity and traumatizes their followers.

My friend articulated something that stunned me: She braces herself every Sunday night to see which Christian pastor or leader used their Sunday service to announce their failure of character. As she internalizes the foreboding dread of Sunday nights, she’s shaken in her soul.

When fellow followers of Jesus—and leaders we look up to—continue to disappoint us, reconciling the failures of humans with an unshakable faith in Christ might be the single most important endeavor you and I need to pursue. That’s why we go to God’s Word: to center our faith on Jesus. Not on our favorite preacher, the bestselling author that changed our life, or the Christians annoying us on social media. Our hope is in Jesus. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He’s our foundational truth.

Jesus never fails. And he won't fail you.

My friend said something in our conversation I'll never forget: All the moral failures of her spiritual heroes and all the reckoning within the church isn't just undermining her trust in leaders and herself—it's causing her to question whether Christianity itself is valid. If God's people are not Christlike, and becoming like Christ is the point of Christianity, is the way of Christ true?

If you're asking this question as well, let me hold this space for you. But let me also say to you: The way of Christ cannot be undone or shaken by the failures of his people. Not by our leaders, not by our friends, not even by ourselves.

God never tried to hide the reality of fallen humanity in the pages of inspired Scripture. One of the ways he made sure we can anchor our faith in Jesus was by telling the truth in the Bible about how even the seemingly best of us can get it wrong. God could have easily omitted these stories, but instead, he chose to magnify these failures in unflattering characterizations—archetypes that represent religious authorities falling short. He did so to prove we *all* need a Savior.

And he *is* the Savior.

My own concerns about the credibility of Christian leaders sent me into the Scriptures to study New Testament characters—messed-up religious people acting foolishly. In some providential way, uncovering this archetype in God's Word filled me with hope and peace. Hope that God continues to hold people accountable, uses broken people, and restores us when we repent. And peace—that I can still enjoy a relationship with Jesus when religious leaders fall and religion feels unstable.

Whether you are new to the Christian faith or a seasoned Bible reader, I'm praying that your time studying saintly characters in the Bible is an awe-inspiring catalyst to engage and experience God's truth—that you would marvel at the artistry of God's storytelling. And that you would see, as you sit in the stories of these broken leaders, that not even the most painful human failures can disrupt God's work and his deep love for you.

Love,



The Storyline of Scripture

YOUR DECISION TO STUDY THE BIBLE for the next few weeks is no accident—God has brought you here, to this moment. And I don't want to take it for granted. Here, at the beginning, I want to invite you into the most important step you can take, the one that brings the whole of the Bible alive in extraordinary ways: a relationship with Jesus.

The Bible is a collection of divinely inspired manuscripts written over fifteen hundred years by at least forty different authors. Together, the manuscripts make up tens of thousands of verses, sixty-six books, and two testaments. Point being: It's a lot of content.

But the Bible is really just one big story: God's story of redemption. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible includes narratives, songs, poems, wisdom literature, letters, and even apocalyptic prophecies. Yet everything we read in God's Word helps us understand God's love and his plan to be in a relationship with us.

If you hear nothing else, hear this: God loves you.

It's easy to get lost in the vast amount of information in the Bible, so we're going to explore the storyline of Scripture in four parts. And as you locate your experience in the story of the Bible, I hope the story of redemption becomes your own.

PART 1: GOD MADE SOMETHING GOOD.

The big story—God's story of redemption—started in a garden. When God launched his project for humanity, he purposed all of us—his image bearers—to flourish and co-create with him. In the beginning there was peace, beauty, order, and abundant life. The soil was good. Life was good. We rarely hear this part of our story, but it doesn't make it less true. God created something good—and that includes you.

PART 2: WE MESSED IT UP.

If you've ever thought, *This isn't how it's supposed to be*, you're right. It's not. We messed up God's good world. Do you ever feel like you've won gold medals in messing things up? Me too. All humanity shares in that brokenness. We are imperfect. The people we love are imperfect. Our systems are jacked, and our world is broken. And that's on us. We made the mess, and we literally can't help ourselves. We need to be rescued from our circumstances, the systems in which we live, and ourselves.

PART 3: JESUS MAKES IT RIGHT.

The good news is that God can clean up all our messes, and he does so through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No one denies that Jesus lived and died. That's just history. It's the empty tomb and the hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after his death that make us scratch our heads. Because science can only prove something that is repeatable, we are dependent upon the eyewitness testimonies of Jesus' resurrection for this once-in-history moment. If Jesus rose from the dead—and I believe he did—Jesus is exactly who he said he was, and he accomplished exactly what had been predicted for thousands of years. He restored

us. Jesus made *it*, all of it, right. He can forgive your sins and connect you to the holy God through his life, death, and resurrection.

PART 4: ONE DAY, GOD WILL MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

The best news is that this is not as good as it gets. A day is coming when Christ will return. He's coming back to re-create our world: a place with no tears, no pain, no suffering, no brokenness, no helplessness—just love. God will make all things new. In the meantime, God invites you to step into his storyline, to join him in his work of restoring all things. Rescued restorers live with purpose and on mission: not a life devoid of hardship, but one filled with enduring hope.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S STORYLINE

If the storyline of Scripture feels like a lightbulb turning on in your soul, that, my friend, is the one true, living God, who eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is inviting you into a relationship with him to have your sins forgiven and secure a place in his presence forever. When you locate your story within God's story of redemption, you begin a lifelong relationship with God that brings meaning, hope, and restoration to your life.

Take a moment now to begin a relationship with Christ:

God, I believe the story of the Bible, that Jesus is Lord and you raised him from the dead to forgive my sins and make our relationship possible. Your storyline is now my story. I want to learn how to love you and share your love with others. Amen.

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

ROMANS 10:9, NRSV

How to Use This Bible Study

THE **STORYLINE BIBLE STUDIES** are versatile and can be used for

- + individual study (self-paced),
- + small groups (five- or ten-lesson curriculum), or
- + church ministry (semester-long curriculum).

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Each lesson in the *Saints* Bible study is divided into four fifteen- to twenty-minute parts (sixty to eighty minutes of individual study time per lesson). You can work through the material one part at a time over a few different days or all in one sitting. Either way, this study will be like anything good in your life: What you put in, you get out. Each of the four parts of each lesson will help you practice Bible-study methods.

SMALL GROUPS

Working through the *Saints* Bible study with a group could be a catalyst for life change. Although the Holy Spirit can teach you truth when you read the Bible on your own, I want to encourage you to gather a small group together to work through this study for these reasons:

- + God himself is in communion as one essence and three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- + Interconnected, interdependent relationships are hallmarks of the Christian faith life.
- + When we collaborate with each other in Bible study, we have access to the viewpoints of our brothers and sisters in Christ, which enrich our understanding of the truth.

For this Bible study, every small-group member will need a copy of the *Saints* study guide. In addition, I've created a free downloadable small-group guide that includes

- + discussion questions for each lesson,
- + Scripture readings, and
- + prayer prompts.

Whether you've been a discussion leader for decades or just volunteered to lead a group for the first time, you'll find the resources you need to create a loving atmosphere for men and women to grow in Christlikeness. You can download the small-group guide using this QR code.



CHURCH MINISTRY

Church and ministry leaders: Your work is sacred. I know that planning and leading through a semester of ministry can be both challenging and rewarding. That's why every **Storyline Bible Study** is written so that you can build modular semesters of ministry. The *Saints* Bible study is designed to complement the

Sinners Bible study. Together, *Sinners* and *Saints* can support a whole semester of ministry seamlessly, inviting the people you lead into God's Word and making your life simpler.

To further equip church and ministry leaders, I've created *The Leader's Guide*, a free digital resource. You can download *The Leader's Guide* using this QR code.



The Leader's Guide offers these resources:

- + a sample ministry calendar for a ten-plus-lesson semester of ministry,
- + small-group discussion questions for each lesson,
- + Scripture readings for each lesson,
- + prayer prompts for each lesson,
- + five teaching topics for messages that could be taught in large-group settings, and
- + resources for deeper study.

SPECIAL FEATURES

However you decide to utilize the *Saints* Bible study, whether for individual, self-paced devotional time; as a small-group curriculum; or for semester-long church ministry, you'll notice several stand-out features unique to the **Storyline Bible Studies**:

- + gospel presentation at the beginning of each Bible study;
- + full Scripture passages included in the study so that you can mark up the text and keep your notes in one place;
- + insights from diverse scholars, authors, and Bible teachers;
- + an emphasis on close readings of large portions of Scripture;
- + following one theme instead of focusing on one verse or passage;
- + Christological narrative theology without a lot of church-y words; and
- + retrospective or imaginative readings of the Bible to help Christians follow the storyline of Scripture.

You may have studied the Bible by book, topic, or passage before; all those approaches are enriching ways to read the Word of God. The **Storyline Bible Studies** follow a literary thread to deepen your appreciation for God's master plan of redemption and develop your skill in connecting the Old Testament to the New.



INTRODUCTION

THE SAINTS STORYLINE

EVERY PERSON WE SURVEY in this Bible study is deeply embedded in an ancient, symbol-driven world where the characters of a story don't just exist—they also represent concepts larger than the people themselves. Sometimes God repurposes character archetypes to emphasize particular themes. The theme we'll be exploring in this study is a cautionary tale for Christians and Christian leaders—none of us are above the actions described in the Bible. And yet God moves and works and draws us to himself, even as those created in his image fail.

The *Saints* Bible study will guide you through five Bible stories in which a person acts unrighteously even though they are committed to God. Their presence in the Scriptures is a key element in the story, embodying truths about God's holiness and grace.

I want to address a potential pitfall of studying a type of person in the Scriptures and connecting foil characters in one Bible study: We're going to be

tempted to reduce people to their worst mistakes—to write off types of people. You might read about disloyal disciples, power-hungry high priests, and confused Pharisees only to grow cynical and suspicious of everyone who shared the same title: disciple, high priest, or Pharisee. But I hope you dig deeper and see the bigger picture.

Beyond these disappointing characters is a God whose loyal love never fails, who is always entrusting others with his power, and who always brings clarity to our lives. Unrighteous “saints” are not a new problem, and we don’t need a new solution. Furthermore, the point of this study is not to identify a character type and then vilify them or generalize their failures in a way that implicates every person like them. The point is to identify *with* their failures and see that all of us are still offered a deep relationship with Jesus based on his grace.

In *Saints*, we’re going to explore

- + *John 3, 7, 19*: Nicodemus, the Pharisee disoriented by Jesus’ testimony;
- + *John 6, 12, 13, 18*: Judas, the disciple who sold Jesus out;
- + *John 11, 18; Acts 4*: Caiaphas, the high priest unwilling to steward his power generously;
- + *John 18, 21*: Peter, the disciple who denied being connected to Jesus; and
- + *Acts 8; 1 Timothy 1*: Paul, the Pharisee who persecuted Christians.

We’re going to do this by looking at each person through four different lenses:

- + **PART 1: CONTEXT.** Do you ever feel dropped into a Bible story disoriented? Part 1 will introduce you to the character you’re going to study and help you study their story in its scriptural context. Getting your bearings before you read will enable you to answer the question *What am I about to read?*
- + **PART 2: SEEING.** Do you ever read on autopilot? I do too. Sometimes I finish reading without a clue as to what just happened. A better way to read the Bible is to practice thoughtful, close reading of Scripture to absorb the message God is offering to us. That’s why part 2 includes close Scripture

reading and observation questions to empower you to answer the question *What is the story saying?*

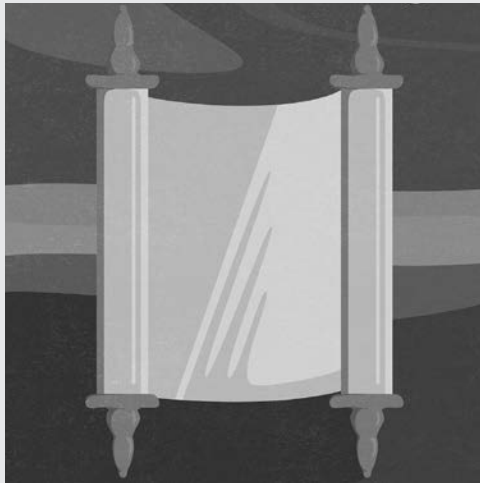
- + **PART 3: UNDERSTANDING.** If you've ever scratched your head after reading your Bible, part 3 will give you the tools to understand the author's intended meaning both for the original audience and for you. Plus you'll practice connecting the Old and New Testaments to get a fuller picture of God's unchanging grace. Part 3 will enable you to answer the question *What does it mean?*
- + **PART 4: RESPONDING.** The purpose of Bible study is to help you become more Christlike; that's why part 4 will include journaling space for your reflection on and responses to the content and a blank checklist for actionable next steps. You'll be able to process what you're learning so that you can live out the concepts and pursue Christlikeness. Part 4 will enable you to answer the questions *What truths is this passage teaching?* and *How do I apply this to my life?*

One of my prayers for you, as a curious Bible reader, is that our journey through this study will help you cultivate a biblical imagination so that you're able to make connections throughout the whole storyline of the Bible. In each lesson, I'll do my best to include a few verses from different places in the Bible that are connected to our characters. In the course of this study, we'll see the way God shows up for people throughout his Word—and get a glimpse of how he might show up in our lives today.

God's Word is so wonderful, I hardly know how to contain my excitement. Feel free to geek out with me; let your geek flag fly high, my friends. When we can see how interrelated all the parts of Scripture are to each other, we'll find our affection for God stirred as we see his artistic brilliance unfold.

LESSON ONE

ACCEPTING JESUS' WORDS WHEN THEY CHALLENGE YOUR WORLDVIEW



**NICODEMUS:
THE PHARISEE WHO IS DISORIENTED BY JESUS' TESTIMONY**

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 3, 7, 19



PART 1

CONTEXT

Before you begin your study, we will start with the context of the story we are about to read together: the setting, both cultural and historical; the people involved; and where our passage fits in the larger setting of Scripture. All these things help us make sense of what we're reading. Understanding the context of a Bible story is fundamental to reading Scripture well. Getting your bearings before you read will enable you to answer the question *What am I about to read?*

YEARS AGO, the TV series *Lost* sucked me in. I had to see the show all the way through even though I *lost* interest long before the show ended—I needed to justify the significant investment of time I'd put into the early seasons. Also, I was determined to find answers to all my lingering questions. Surely, I thought, the creators of *Lost* would finally bring clarity to my confusion.

Part of the plot was introducing new people as “the others.” The new characters, “the others,” had a dual purpose. They helped the writers of the show start a new plotline while at the same time making a broader statement about humanity: We tend to reject people we don't understand.

I bring up “the others” from *Lost* because I want to hedge off any assumptions you and I might make about Nicodemus, the Pharisee we are about to study. It's possible we might come to the Bible assuming that the Pharisees = all Jews = all legalistic.

Although the New Testament writers present some Pharisees as foils or as archetypes of religious people, missing Jesus as the Messiah, we also have examples like Nicodemus and Paul: Pharisees who at first resisted Jesus as the Messiah but then end up changing their minds about Christ. Just because some of the Pharisees misjudged Jesus or struggled to reconcile their interpretation of the law with his claim to fulfill it doesn't make all Pharisees the epitome of legalism or enemies of the Christian faith. Two things can be true at the same time. Some Pharisees in the Bible missed Jesus as the Messiah, and also, not all Pharisees were "bad."

Pharisees like Nicodemus can be reminders that accepting Jesus' words—especially when his truth challenges our worldview—is hard. Sometimes religious people, the ones who are assumed to be the most likely to "get it" . . . don't.

Or, if I may be so bold as to rephrase my point: Sometimes *we* don't get it.

The Pharisees serve as a literary archetype in the Bible's narrative. They are the well-intentioned group of God's people trying to find a way to live up to the law's standards while also accepting their humanness. When Jesus appeared as the fulfillment of their way of life, some of the Pharisees missed it, including Nicodemus.

What you are about to read is a story about a man who was curious enough to approach Jesus with his questions but confused enough to reject his answers. Nicodemus eventually came around to faith in Christ. But Nicodemus's example

In popular Jewish imagination, the Pharisees are the respected teachers of Second Temple Judaism: the ones who extended the holiness of the temple beyond the priests to the people; the ones who insisted on free will along with divine care; the ones who, because of their openness to innovation and concern for the Jewish people as a whole, helped the tradition survive the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.¹

Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Pharisees*

shows us we are not the only people who have ever tried to reconcile Jesus' truth with our human traditions. We are not the only people who seek Jesus in the dark nights of the soul. And we are not alone in our struggle to accept Jesus' testimony of truth as superior to our past views.

If you are trying to put your faith back together and wrestling with the claims of Christ, you're in good company. Nicodemus will show us that sometimes we just need more time with Jesus to fully understand the truth.

So take your time in this lesson. God will not rush you. He is patient.

If God treats us anything like he did Nicodemus, he will welcome your questions, offer you answers, embody his claims, and prove he is trustworthy.

1. PERSONAL CONTEXT: What is going on in your life right now that might impact how you understand this Bible character?

2. SPIRITUAL CONTEXT: If you've never studied this Bible character before, what piques your curiosity? If you've studied this character before, what impressions and insights do you recall?



PART 2

SEEING

Seeing the text is vital if we want the heart of the Scripture passage to sink in. We read slowly and intentionally through the text with the context in mind. As we practice close, thoughtful reading of Scripture, we pick up on phrases, implications, and meanings we might otherwise have missed. Part 2 includes close Scripture reading and observation questions to empower you to answer the question *What is the story saying?*

1. Read John 3:1-21 and circle everything Nicodemus says to Jesus.

3 There was a man from the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to him at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ “How can anyone be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked him. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not

be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. ⁸ The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

⁹ "How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus.

¹⁰ "Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?" Jesus replied. ¹¹ "Truly I tell you, we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man.

¹⁴ "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God."

JOHN 3:1-21

John 3:1 identifies Nicodemus as a Pharisee, or a ruler of the people. Since so much time and history stand between us and the Pharisees, here are some facts about the Pharisees:

- + All Pharisees were Jewish, but not all Jews were Pharisees.

- + The Pharisees were a group of devout, God-fearing Jews who represented a school of thought known for interpreting the law—the law given by God to the Israelites at Mount Sinai—precisely. But not so they could exclude or condemn. Quite the opposite. They were known for their leniency.²
- + Pharisees were known for applying the law in a way that created less severe punishment for sins. For instance, they resisted capital punishment. Compared to the priests, they were lenient with the law.
- + Pharisees believed that a Messiah was coming and that resurrection from the dead was the future of righteous people.

2. Reflecting on what we just learned about Pharisees, why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus? What could his motivation have been for approaching Jesus with his questions? List anything that comes to mind.

The Pharisees were less the conservative preservers of the status quo and more countercultural teachers and creative innovators who offered popular, lenient alternative teachings to the stringency promoted by the priests in the temple and the covenanters at Qumran.³

Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Pharisees*

3. What did Nicodemus know about Jesus before this conversation? (See John 3:1-2.)

4. What did Jesus tell Nicodemus was required to see the Kingdom of God? (See John 3:3.)

Nicodemus responded to Jesus by asking how these things could be true. I love Nicodemus. I'd want to know the same thing had I been in this conversation with Jesus. I would have said, "But how, though?"

5. What faith questions would you bring up to Jesus if he were standing right in front of you?

6. In your own words, paraphrase what Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3:16-17.

If Nicodemus, like all Pharisees, believed a Messiah was coming, Jesus' claims to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world would have required investigation.

Nicodemus couldn't accept Jesus' words in the moment, but he also couldn't ignore his desire to learn more—because he believed that the law didn't judge a person until their testimony was heard and their actions could be proved.

Notice, for example, how Nicodemus responded to a crowd who wanted to condemn Jesus in John 7:50-51: “Nicodemus—the one who came to him previously and who was one of them—said to them, ‘Our law doesn't judge a man before it hears from him and knows what he's doing, does it?’”

7. When Jesus used the metaphor of light in this conversation, he was referring to himself. Jesus is the Light of the World. Replace every instance of *light* or *the light* in John 3:19-21 by filling in each blank with the name *Jesus*:

¹⁹ “This is the judgment: _____ has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than _____ because their deeds were evil.

²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates _____ and avoids _____, so that his deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But anyone who lives by the truth comes to _____, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.”

JOHN 3:19-21

8. How do you imagine Nicodemus responded to this conversation? Check any options that seem possible. Next to your choice(s), write out a phrase that explains why you might have expected this reaction.

confused

speechless

frustrated

hopeful

curious

intrigued

intent

doubtful

amazed

shocked

resistant

other:

In view of the obviously symbolic function of “night” in the Gospel, and the scriptural association of darkness with ignorance or lack of understanding, this visit at night may illustrate what will be spelled out later in the chapter: “the light has come into the world” (3:19) to bring people out of darkness.⁴

Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*

Before we move on to a deeper understanding of the meaning of this conversation, I want to point out that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark. Many scholars speculate why he would have chosen to approach Jesus at this time of day. Although we can't be sure, I wonder if, just as light and darkness are metaphors Jesus used to represent spiritual realities, the physical darkness Nicodemus traveled through to get to Jesus represents the spiritual darkness he was walking through in his personal life. Was he in a dark night of the soul? Had the shadows of doubt clouded his faith? Did he lack light in his life? Did the darkness represent confusion or a lack of understanding? If so, you and I can take comfort in this: We can come to Jesus in our own dark nights of the soul.

Even if we sneak around to get to his presence and do so without a lot of light in our lives, he will receive us anyway. And he will not just stay with us or embrace and dismiss our questions and doubts. Jesus illuminates the darkness—because he is the Light of the World.

