

3:16

THE NUMBERS OF HOPE

STUDY GUIDE | FIVE SESSIONS

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 HarperChristian
Resources

3:16—The Numbers of Hope Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

If you're a churchgoer, you've likely heard it a thousand times. Even if you're not the churchgoing type, you've probably seen it embroidered on a pillow or written in calligraphy on a piece of artwork. The sentence is prolific in our language and culture. But its words are more than a good saying, a favorite memory verse, or a catchy lyric. John 3:16 is the thesis of the New Testament. The climax of a theological moment. It is the Hope Diamond of the Bible.

*For God
so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him
shall not perish but have
eternal life.*

There it is—a twenty-six-word parade of hope, beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather two thousand years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here.

If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. And God's treatment is prescribed in John 3:16.

He loves.

He gave.

We believe.

We live.

Each word is a safe-deposit box of jewels. Read it again, slowly and aloud, and note the word that snatches your attention: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

"For God so loved the world . . ." Yes, *this* world, filled with its heartbreakers, hope-snatchers, and dream-dousters. Dictators rage. Abusers inflict. Reverends think they deserve the title. But still God *loves*. In fact, he loves the world so much he gave his:

"One and only Son . . ." The mind-bending claim of John 3:16 is that God gave not abstract ideas but a flesh-wrapped divinity. The Bible equates Jesus with God. So God, then, out of his great love for the world gave of *himself*. Why? So that:

"Whoever believes in him shall not perish." *Whoever* . . . a universal word. All are invited to receive. And *perish* . . . a sobering word. A warning of the consequences for not receiving. We'd like to dilute the term. But not Jesus. He pounds Do Not Enter signs on every square inch of Satan's gate and tells those hell-bent on entering to do so over his dead body. Even so, some souls insist—and in the end, some perish and

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some live. What determines the difference? Not works or talents, pedigrees, or possessions. The difference is determined by *belief*.

Bible translators in the New Hebrides islands once struggled to find an appropriate verb for *believe*. One translator, John G. Paton, accidentally came upon a solution while hunting with a tribesman. The two men bagged a large deer and carried it on a pole along a steep mountain path to Paton's home. When they reached the veranda, the men dropped the load and plopped into the porch chairs. As they did, the native exclaimed in the language of his people, "My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest."

Paton immediately reached for paper and pencil and recorded the phrase. As a result, his final translation of John 3:16 was worded: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever stretcheth himself out on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

As you go through this study and receive God's Word for you, may you do just that—stretch out on Christ and rest.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The *3:16* video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or small-group gathering) and also as an individual study. Each session begins with a brief opening reflection and ice-breaker questions to get you and your group thinking about the topic. You will then watch a video with Max Lucado, which can be accessed via the streaming code found on the inside front cover. If you are doing the study with a group, you will then engage in some directed small-group discussion. You will close each session with a time of personal reflection and prayer as a group.

Each person in the group should have his or her own study guide, which includes video teaching notes, Bible study and group discussion questions, and between-sessions personal studies to help you reflect and apply the material to your life during the week. You are also encouraged to have a copy of the *3:16* book, as reading it alongside the curriculum will provide you with deeper insights and make the journey more meaningful. See the “recommended reading” section at the end of each session for the chapters in the book that correspond to the material you and your group are discussing.

To get the most out of your group experience, keep the following points in mind. First, the real growth in this study will happen during your small-group time. This is where you will process the video content for the week, ask questions, and learn from others as you hear what God is doing in their lives. For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only go through the motions, or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you're looking for during this study.

Second, remember that the goal of your small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship. For this reason, seek to make your group a safe place. This means being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else's opinion. (If you are a group leader, there are additional instructions and resources in the back of the book for leading a productive discussion group.)

Third, resist the temptation to fix a problem someone might be having or to correct his or her theology, as that's not the purpose of your small-group time. Also, keep everything your group shares confidential. This will foster a rewarding sense of community in your group and create a place where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

Following your group time, you can maximize the impact of the course with the additional between-session studies. For each session, you may wish to complete the personal study all in one sitting or spread it out over a few days (for example, working on it a half-hour a day on four different days that

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week). Note that if you are unable to finish (or even start) your between-sessions personal study, you should still attend the group study video session. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don't have your "homework" done.

Keep in mind that the videos, discussion questions, and activities are simply meant to kick-start your imagination so you are open to what God wants you to hear and how to apply it to your life. So, as you go through this study on John 3:16, listen to what God is saying to you as you and your group explore this important verse in the Bible.

SESSION ONE

THE MOST FAMOUS
CONVERSATION
IN THE BIBLE

*“A man named Nicodemus . . .
came to Jesus at night.”*

John 3:1–2

WELCOME

If you could go back in time, what would you change? If you got a do-over, what would you redo? Hindsight—it’s 20/20. Regret—it’s plentiful. With some areas, seasons, years, people, and events in our lives, we just wish we could do them again.

But in our finite bodies on this finite planet and in our finite timelines, we know going back to the past just isn’t possible. So we can’t blame Nicodemus for his confusion when Jesus said, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). *Be born again?* “How can someone be born when they are old?” he asked (verse 4).

In a world of no second chances, one shot, and better-get-it-right-the-first-time, it's hard to conceive of what it means to be born again. All we know is “missing the boat,” “better luck next time,” and “if at first you don't succeed . . .” honestly, you probably won't.

Nicodemus may not have understood it in the moment, but what he received from Jesus that night was hope. A hope to start over, be new, be clean. A chance to actually be born, again. As John explained, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (verse 16).

It's simple, really. But we tend to complicate it. We replace “whoever believes in him” with “whoever is good enough, smart enough, compassionate enough . . . is worthy of God's love.” We take ourselves out of the equation. “My past is too questionable. No re-dos. No do-overs.”

John 3:16 assures us otherwise. It brings us hope for our future and hope for today. We can be born again in this life and be born again into eternity with the God who loves us. What can be better than that? What's more, our rebirth is not up to us. If it were, there's no guarantee we would do it right the second time. It is made possible only by the power of God and through the saving grace of Jesus. When he is in charge of the do-over, the do-over is always done right.

As you take this deep dive into one of the richest verses in Scripture, may you remain open to this God whose love is so big it covers the whole world—whose love is so big it covers *you*.

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SHARE

If you or any of your group members are just getting to know one another, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to get things started, discuss one of the following questions:

- What do you associate with John 3:16? A person, a period in your life, something you've read? Why does this verse conjure that association?

— *or* —

- What immediately comes to mind when you think of John 3:16? What especially stands out to you about the verse?

READ

Invite someone to read aloud the following passage. Listen for fresh insights as you hear the verses being read and then discuss the questions that follow.

⁵ *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes*

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from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

John 3:5–8

What was one key insight that stood out to you from the Scripture?

What role does the Spirit play in our being born again?

WATCH

Play the video segment for session one (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

Nicodemus came to Jesus “at night.” Most of the events in the Bible—especially the important ones—happened during the day. That was the time to see and be seen, to teach and to learn, and to ask and answer. But not this discussion.

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Nicodemus took a risk in conducting this conversation with Christ. It's a risk that all of us today should be glad he was willing to take. For out of this short discussion comes one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." (John 3:3). With this proclamation, Jesus carves out the Continental Divide of Scripture. The international date line of faith.

The Greek word that Jesus uses for again is *anōthen*. It depicts a repeated action, but it requires the original source to repeat it. Jesus is saying the original Creator re-creates his creation. The potter reforms the clay.

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Jesus describes the source of his testimony—that he is a witness to heavenly things and heavenly truths. He reveals that he alone has the authority to speak of heaven because he alone has come down from heaven.

The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human—and God’s prescription is found in John 3:16. *He loves. He gave. We believe. We live.*

DISCUSS

Take some time with your group to discuss what you just watched and answer the following questions.

1. Before starting this study, how would you have described John 3:16 and its role in the Christian faith?

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2. What were Nicodemus' credentials in the Jewish religion and culture? Why is this important to know in the context of his conversation with Jesus?

3. What is the difference between the Greek words *palin* and *anōthen*? Which one did Jesus use in John 3:3? What is the significance of this?

4. According to John 3:3, what does it mean to be “born again”? Does this differ from how you've understood this phrase in the past? If so, how?

5. Read John 3:13–16. What claims are made in this passage? Which ones are easy for you to believe? Which ones are difficult for you to believe?

RESPOND

Briefly review the outline for the video teaching and any notes you took. In the space below, write down the most significant point you took away from this session.

PRAY

One of the most important things you can do together in community is to pray for each other. This is not simply a closing prayer to end your group time but a portion of time to share prayer requests, review how God has answered past prayers, and actually pray for one another. As you close your time together this week, ask God to open your hearts to receive his truth over the next several weeks. Ask him to strengthen your faith and understanding as you learn more about these life-saving words in John 3:16. Pray that the message will ring as true for you today as it did that night with Nicodemus so many years ago. Praise God that no matter what you have done in your past, we can have eternal life through the saving power of Jesus. Finally, use the space below to write down any specific prayer requests or praises for the coming week.

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NAME	REQUEST / PRAISE

BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

SESSION ONE

Take some time to reflect on the material you've covered this week by engaging in any or all of the following between-sessions activities. Each personal study consists of a passage of Scripture and reflection questions to help you dig deeper into this week's session. For this week, you will take a closer look at John 3:1–21 in order to understand the full context of the verse at the center of this study. The time you invest will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him. At the start of the next session, you will have a few minutes to share any insights that you learned with the group.

DAY 1: HE CAME TO JESUS AT NIGHT

This week, you were introduced to the context around John 3:16. It involved a Pharisee seeking out Jesus by cover of darkness and Christ revealing the most important of gospel truths to him. In a way, this is a strange conversation between two unlikely characters, but this brief interaction can tell us a

lot about what Jesus is like and how we are invited to interact with him. Read about Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus in John 3:1–4 and answer the questions below.

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Have you ever sought Jesus out in the way Nicodemus did—with urgency (and maybe even secretly)? What were you seeking from Jesus?

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Why do you think Nicodemus approached Jesus at night? Although the Bible doesn't tell us, what do you think he wanted from Jesus?

According to verse 3, how did Jesus respond to Nicodemus' praise? Why do you think Jesus responded this way?

Can you relate to Nicodemus' confusion in verse 4? Have you ever felt confused by something in the Bible or by something you felt God tell you? If so, explain what that experience was like.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for the promise we have in Nicodemus, who reminds us that we can approach you at any time—day or night—and you will be available to us, ready to listen, and ready to respond with truth. May we be bold like Nicodemus and seek you for answers, guidance, assurance, and hope. Thank you for meeting us in the darkness and showing us light.*

DAY 2: HOW CAN THIS BE?

Yesterday, we left Nicodemus with a lingering question: *How can someone be born again?* Today, you will read about this phrase in John 3:5–11. We often throw around words and phrases found in our faith and in our churches that sound good, but we don't always understand what they really mean. See what you can learn about what it really means to be born again. You might be surprised by what you didn't know!

⁵ *Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.*

⁶ *Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*

⁷ *You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'* ⁸ *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

⁹ *"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.*

¹⁰ *"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"* ¹¹ *Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony."*

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When is the first time you remember hearing the phrase “born again”? How has your understanding of this phrase changed between that first time and now?

What does a spiritual rebirth look like? If this is something you’ve experienced, describe that moment.

Who are “you people” in verse 11? Why do you think it was difficult for this group to believe in what Jesus said?

Is there anything in your life that needs spiritual renewal or rebirth? A relationship, circumstance, feelings of regret, or bitterness? List those things here.

Prayer: *God, thank you for the promise of new life. Even when I don't understand you, your power, or how you work, I know that as I have been born again in the Spirit, so can different areas of my life. You bring restoration to broken relationships. You bring healing to ailing bodies. You bring justice to unjust situations. Do the work of renewal in my life. Bring the wind of grace, peace, and love where I need it most. Make me new, as you do each day.*

DAY 3: LIFTED UP

In John 3:14, Jesus compared himself to the snake that Moses lifted up in the wilderness—an event described in Numbers 21:4–8. Even though the Israelites had been saved from slavery, they often complained to Moses about their journey into the desert, forgetting what God had done for them. In Numbers 21:6, God sent venomous snakes to punish the Israelites for their complaints. Then, when the Israelites cried out to be saved from the snakes, God instructed Moses to craft a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Whenever an Israelite was bitten by a snake, if he looked at the bronze

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snake, he would be saved from harm. With this context in mind, read John 3:12–15.

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came 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 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

When did you first learn about salvation through Christ? How was it explained to you? How does your understanding of salvation today differ from how you originally understood it?

Considering the story from Numbers 21:4–8, how is Jesus like the bronze snake lifted up by Moses?

Nicodemus was a student of the Law and Hebrew Scriptures. He would have been familiar with this story of Moses and the bronze snake. How do you think he interpreted Jesus' comparison?

How does this story of Moses change or help explain how you understand salvation, our sin, and our relationship with God because of our sin?

Prayer: *Father, I confess salvation can be a hard concept for me to understand and believe. Some days, I feel overwhelmed by my sin and am so grateful for my salvation. Other days, I feel like I can do this on my own because I'm a good person and don't need salvation. And many days, I fall somewhere in between.*

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Help me understand the saving nature of Jesus. I have learned about it a dozen times, but let this lesson take up residence in my heart. May I feel it and believe it and know that it is true on days that I let my sin get the best of me and on days when my sin is believing that I have none.

DAY 4: COME INTO THE LIGHT

In John 3:16–21, the basis of the Christian faith is explained. Who God is, who Jesus is, and what that means for our sin is laid out in a clear picture for Nicodemus and for us. While John 3:16 is one of the first verses we learn when we become a Christian, we can still confuse the roles of the Father, the Son, and our own in the context of our salvation and eternity. Read the passage and be on the lookout for new insights and revelations.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall 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 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

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How do you feel about your salvation today? Do you believe completely that Jesus has saved you? Are you unsure due to your past or current sin? Are you unsure because you're not sure what you believe theologically about salvation and how it works? Explain your response.

According to this passage, why did God send his Son into the world and how are we saved by him?

How did Jesus bring light to the world?

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What did you learn about God in this passage? What did you learn about Jesus? What did you learn about your own sin or darkness?

Prayer: *Dear God, your verdict is light. You have tried us. You have seen our sin and still, in your love, you bring us into the light of Christ. Thank you for this truth. Thank you that my sin does not have to stay in darkness and that when it is brought into the light, it is done away with for good. Help me believe this. Free me from the yoke of my own sin and regret and remind me of yours—the one that is easy and light.*

FOR NEXT WEEK

Use the space below to write any key points or questions you want to bring to the next group meeting. In preparation for next week, read chapters 3–4 in *3:16*.