

John Chapter 3

THE NEW BIRTH

You may recall that the last part of John chapter 2 told of how Jesus became quite angry when He saw that His Father's house, The Temple, was being used as a market to buy and sell animal sacrifices. He chased everyone out and overturned the tables pouring out all of the money belonging to the moneychangers and merchants. Then we read in John 2, beginning at verse 18 ESV:

18 So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"

19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

20 The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?"

21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

22 When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people

25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Now we will continue in John 3: 1-21 ESV:

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the

Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.

20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.”

First, let us take an overview of this section. Then we will go back and walk through it verse by verse. As chapter 3 begins we find Jesus meeting a man by the name of **Nicodemus**. This meeting picks up where chapter 2 ended with Jesus reflecting on just how much He could, or could not, trust the people who were following Him (2:23–25). The encounter with Nicodemus is a continuation of what Jesus had previously said about not yet trusting the people. Obviously Jesus knew of the need each person had for a new birth and Jesus did not have to rely in any way on Nicodemus' position as a religious leader to help Him accomplish His mission. Nicodemus was just another human being like everyone else and he too needed to be told about the necessity of being born again. John 3:1–21 gives us a sample of the kind of questions the Jews were asking about Jesus. First we listen in on a discussion that Jesus and Nicodemus had in verses 1–15. Then in verses 16–21 John adds some commentary about the discussion. John's purpose in verses 1–8 is to explain how salvation is the result of being born again, undergoing a new birth.

The word was getting around the countryside about this teacher who was performing all kinds of miracles. A Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus had heard about His teaching and His miracles. Jesus did not waste much time in telling Nicodemus that a person cannot really enter into a meaningful discussion about spiritual issues until they are “born again.” Even though the concept of a spiritual rebirth appears in the Old Testament, Nicodemus did not have a clue as to what Jesus was talking about. Just as most people today do not understand the concept of being born

again. Some think it comes from some sort of emotional or mystical experience. Others consider finding a new philosophy of life or even undergoing psychotherapy to constitute a rebirth. Even some describe a new job or new hair-do as being born again. How greatly they miss the point!

Jesus explains the truth of His message to Nicodemus (verses 10–15). Jesus also tells him about the tremendous price God is going to pay in order to offer eternal life to men and women (verses 16–17).

Salvation is therefore an issue of belief or unbelief. It is only by trusting Jesus that those who are “condemned already” pass from death to life (verses 18–21).

The **Pharisees** were the most popular political party so to speak in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ ministry. The famous Roman historian, Josephus, reports them to have originated sometime around 145 B.C. They were one of three schools into which the Jews were divided. The other two were the **Essenes** and the **Sadducees**. The Pharisees were noted for strictly observing religious rites and ceremonies of the written Law of God as well as obedience to their own oral traditions which they developed and applied to God’s Law, the Law given by God to Moses. From the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry the Pharisees did everything possible to destroy His influence among the people.¹ The Pharisees maintained the attitude that others needed forgiveness or punishment for their sins, but they were different. They had no such need.²

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the **Sanhedrin**, an aristocratic supreme court possessing jurisdiction over the Jews in both civil and religious matters. Civil matters would have to do with the issues of everyday life. For example, if you were caught speeding on your donkey in a school zone, you might have to appear before the Sanhedrin. That would be a civil matter. If you were accused of ignoring morning and evening prayers, you might be brought before the Sanhedrin. That would be a religious matter. The Sanhedrin functioned as a court to decide major cases and to interpret disputed points of law.³ The miracles that Jesus had performed were seen as having something to do with God, and after listening to Him they had to admit that Jesus was also a gifted teacher. But they were not about to admit that Jesus was the Son of God. So John’s Gospel is for the most part based on the question of whether, knowing that Jesus was a great teacher, would they listen to and learn from Him? Would people believe in His offer of eternal life?

Water and Spirit (3:5) define the phrase “*born again*” in John 3:3, 4, 7.⁴ The concept of being

¹ Easton, M.G.: *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996, c1897.

² Richards, Larry; Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Teacher's Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1987, S. 666.

³ Achtemeier, Paul J.; Harper & Row, Publishers; *Society of Biblical Literature: Harper's Bible Dictionary*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985, S. 905.

⁴ Water and Spirit together indicate a cleansing and spiritual renewal. Jesus certainly knew that Nicodemus was quite knowledgeable about the Old Testament. Thus this interpretation is more likely because it sees in this verse an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25-27. We see that in the Ezekiel passage the cleansing image of water is combined with the giving of God's Spirit for the renewal of the people. Of course, there are other passages in the Old Testament which also refer to the Spirit using water imagery, such as the Spirit being “poured out” upon people. We are not depending on a single reference for our argument, but Ezekiel gives us the most explicit association of Spirit and water. Furthermore, the association of Spirit with birth is clear enough in that it is when God's Spirit or breath (in

“born again” is one that requires an understanding of physical birth versus spiritual birth from God which John discussed in John 1:12–13 NLT:

12 But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.

13 They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

Nicodemus had difficulty understanding the concept of a new birth (3:9–15). He was too indoctrinated in the thinking of the Pharisees who considered themselves automatically saved because of the combination of their birthright as Jews plus their ability to obey the letter of the Law; a Law, by the way, which they had molded over the years to say pretty much what they wanted it to say. That is one of the primary reasons Jesus was so critical of them. The Church has been doing the same thing with the Bible over the last 2,000 years. So much so that people today are very reluctant to believe the truth of the Bible when they hear it.

Jesus was teaching that it was only through a new spiritual creation that a person could obtain salvation and forgiveness of sins. Jesus had been teaching some of the basic truths about the new covenant. He was introducing what had been predicted in the Old Testament. For example, in Jeremiah 31:31–34 NLT:

31 “The day is coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.

32 This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the Lord.

33 “But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day,” says the Lord. “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the Lord.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already,” says the Lord.⁵ “And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.”

Hebrew the same word means "spirit," "wind" and "breath"; in Greek "spirit" and "wind" are two meanings of the same word) comes into Adam that he becomes a living being (Genesis 2:7). This is not literally a birth (no woman was involved), but the parallel is close enough, for it is when the man came alive. What we understand Jesus to be saying, then, is that one must receive the cleansing and spiritual renewal that comes from God. At this stage he may be alluding to the later coming of the Holy Spirit, but Nicodemus would know nothing about that. What Nicodemus is being instructed about is the cleansing from sin and spiritual renewal that come through Jesus, the One from above.—Hard Sayings of the Bible

⁵ Two characteristics of the new covenant are now mentioned (34). First, people will not need to be encouraged to know God, because all will know him. Such knowledge means not only a knowledge of God’s character and ways, but is personal, and implies a commitment of the will. It is a response to his knowledge of us, which is also a total commitment of himself. -----New Bible Commentary **Know me.** This knowledge is intimate, experiential, based on the forgiveness of sins. -

-----Wycliffe Bible Commentary

“I will write them on their hearts“ in verse 33 describes how one’s heart will be changed and prepared for service as a result of faith in Jesus Christ and the resulting grace of God. “Know the Lord” and “will know me already” in verse 34 refer to a knowledge that is intimate and based on one’s personal experience as the result of having their sins forgiven. These verses speak of the time when believers will be given the Holy Spirit to live within them and have Him available to help and guide them whenever they asked.

Ezekiel 36:26–27 NLT:

26 And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.

27 And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

Joel 2:27–29 NLT:

27 Then you will know that I am among my people Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and there is no other. Never again will my people be disgraced.

28 “Then, after doing all those things, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.

29 In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men and women alike.

These are things that Nicodemus, “a respected Jewish teacher,” should have understood (3:10). John provides us with an explanation of the difference between the first and second births in verses 11–15. Jesus’ glory would be made evident by His humiliation in being placed on the cross. What to people was a disgrace, would actually be evidence of Jesus’ deity and glory. *The “bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness”* (3:14) referred back to Numbers 21 where Moses prepared a bronze serpent to deliver the people from death by poisonous snakebites.

Numbers 21:1-9 NLT:

1 The Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that the Israelites were approaching on the road through Atharim. So he attacked the Israelites and took some of them as prisoners.

2 Then the people of Israel made this vow to the Lord: “If you will hand these people over to us, we will completely destroy all their towns.”

3 The Lord heard the Israelites’ request and gave them victory over the Canaanites. The Israelites completely destroyed them and their towns, and the place has been called Hormah ever since.

4 Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey,

5 and they began to speak against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!”

6 So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died.

7 Then the people came to Moses and cried out, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes.” So Moses prayed for the people.

8 Then the Lord told him, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!”

9 So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

The bronze serpent in this Old Testament report was a representation of the Messiah, Jesus, and that He too would be able to save the people when He came. As the serpent was “lifted up,” so would Jesus be lifted up on the cross, and by looking to the cross people could also be saved, just as the people in the Old Testament on their way to Mount Hor were saved by looking at the pole. However, the cross would not be a means of saving them physically, but through faith a way to heal them spiritually.

When Jesus spoke of new birth, belief, and judgment there was an emphasis on personal choice (3:16–21). John 3:20–21 points to the necessity of free choice and the personal responsibility one has for their actions when first exposed to the light, which is the truth of the Gospel message of Christ.⁶

We will now take a closer look at the first 21 verses of John chapter 3 beginning with verse 1:

*1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named **Nicodemus**, a ruler of the Jews. (ESV)*

Nicodemus was a very important man among the Jewish leaders. He was a teacher, a Pharisee, and a member of the **Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council**. The Sanhedrin had 70 members who were responsible for religious decisions and also, under Roman control, for civil (matters relating to the people) rule. Nicodemus would later challenge the Pharisees for condemning Jesus without getting his input (John 7:50-51). He would also later help **Joseph of Arimathea** bury Jesus (19:39-40).⁷

This meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus has a great deal of meaning because Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. He would have been very well acquainted with Jewish teaching and the points Jesus was emphasizing. Here for a brief time Jesus had the opportunity to speak with a Pharisee who was honestly searching for the truth about who Jesus was.

John 3:2 ESV:

*2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “**Rabbi**, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”*

⁶ Hughes, Robert B.; Laney, J. Carl; Hughes, Robert B.: *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (The Tyndale Reference Library), S. 468.

⁷ Walvoord, John F.; Zuck, Roy B.; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:280.

We cannot be certain why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. It may have been to avoid detection because he was either afraid or ashamed to be seen with Jesus.⁸ It is also true that Jesus was involved most of the day in public ministry. Nicodemus was also a busy man and it is possible he could not spare the time during the day to pay Jesus a visit. But when Nicodemus had seen some of Jesus' miracles, he probably made plans to see Jesus as soon as he could. Meeting at night would also provide less chance of being interrupted.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in search of who Jesus is and what He is up to. Right off the bat Nicodemus tells Jesus he knows that He has come from God, but suggests He came only as a teacher. He called him *Rabbi*. It is obvious to Nicodemus that God has sent Jesus and that God was with Him providing Him with supernatural powers and authority. Nicodemus wastes little time in letting Jesus know that he has not come to meet with Him to discuss affairs of state but rather concerns he had about his own salvation. Nicodemus indicates that there are probably others who feel the same way that he does when he says, "We know that you are a teacher..." Perhaps Nicodemus brought one or more of his colleagues with him to hear Jesus.

Another thing verse 2 tells us that might easily be overlooked is that Nicodemus is confirming that Christ performed miracles. Here is a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body, admitting that he has witnessed the miracles that Jesus performed. Jesus' miracles were His identification. If someone comes to your door and says he/she is from the FBI and want to come in and talk with you, the first thing you would probably do is ask for their identification so you could trust them to be who they claimed to be. Jesus' miracles were His identification, His credentials, as being from God.

John 3:3 ESV:

3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

We could freely translate this verse accurately by saying: "*I'm telling you the truth from God. You must be reborn in order to be saved and have eternal life in Heaven.*"

Nicodemus was one of the chief rulers and teachers over the Jews in Jerusalem, yet he did not understand the truth about the new birth. That was because of what Paul taught us in 1 Corinthians 2; spiritual truths cannot be understood by the unsaved mind.

1 Corinthians 2:10-14 NLT:

10 But it was to us that God revealed these things by his Spirit. For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God's deep secrets.

11 No one can know a person's thoughts except that person's own spirit, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit.

12 And we have received God's Spirit (not the world's spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.

13 When we tell you these things, we do not use words that come from human wisdom. Instead, we speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit's

⁸ Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. 4th ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: InterVarsity Press, 1994, S. Jn 3:1.

words to explain spiritual truths.

14 But people who aren't spiritual can't receive these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can't understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means.

I do not believe it would be too much of a stretch to suggest that Nicodemus coming at night might suggest he was in the dark about spiritual things, representing unsaved men and women.

Ephesians 4:17-19 NLT:

17 With the Lord's authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused.

18 Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him.

19 They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity.

2 Corinthians 4:1-9 ESV:

1 Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up.

2 We reject all shameful deeds and underhanded methods. We don't try to trick anyone or distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know this.

3 If the Good News we preach is hidden behind a veil, it is hidden only from people who are perishing.

4 Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

5 You see, we don't go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus' sake.

6 For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

7 We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

8 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

9 We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

Jesus' reference to being born again in John 3 verse 3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," can be understood to mean beginning a brand new life but this time with a relationship to God. Thinking, feeling, and acting will be totally different once a person is under the direction of the Holy Spirit of God. We must not think in terms of patching up the old you, but beginning again from the foundation up. We become a new

person with an entirely new nature, new morals, new affections, and new goals (2 Corinthians 5:17). The soul must be formed and shaped by the Holy Spirit of God. By our first birth we possessed a sinful nature. We must, therefore, be born again and this time with the potential not to sin because of the presence of the Holy Spirit of God within us. This new life is a life in which we have a direct two-way line of communication with God, and the line will always be open for us.

We cannot receive the benefits of Christ and His Gospel without regeneration, without being created again. And this regeneration is absolutely necessary to our happiness in the here and now as well as in the hereafter.

It is through God alone that we can find true happiness. It is not possible to find genuine happiness without the presence of the Holy Spirit of God within us and our allowing that Holy Spirit to guide and direct our lives.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NLT:

*9 Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality,
10 or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.*

11 Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Going back to John 3, “*Cannot see*” in verse 3 would be more understandably translated for us as “*Can have no part in.*” So it could read, “*Unless one is born again he can have no part in the kingdom of God.*” Anyone who is not reborn will be on the outside looking in.

Some of you may have some questions about the Kingdom of God. What is it? When does it begin? Well here is a simple answer that should satisfy us for now: First, the Kingdom of God and The Kingdom of Heaven mean the same thing in the New Testament. Secondly, the Kingdom of God refers to the rule of God, whether in Heaven or on earth. The Kingdom of God was introduced on earth when Christ began His earthly ministry; and it will be fully operational when Christ returns in the end times, locks Satan in the pit, and begins His thousand year reign upon the earth (Revelation 11:15).⁹ So the Kingdom of God on earth began with Christ's ministry at His first coming, is therefore in existence today, and will be fully under the control of Christ when He returns. Today when we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness, as Matthew 6:33 urges us to do, we are seeking God's rule in our personal lives.

Jesus told Nicodemus that it was not enough for him to recognize the miracles Jesus performed. It was not enough for Nicodemus to recognize that Jesus was sent by God. He needed to be *born again*. What might Jesus say to a high-ranking church leader today? He would say the same

⁹ Elwell, Walter A.; Comfort, Philip *Wesley: Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (Tyndale Reference Library), S. 775.

thing: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” Jesus would tell him/her that it is not enough to go through a lot of ritual and to recognize that Jesus is a great teacher, sent by God.

Unless you are born again, you will not enter the Kingdom of God and have everlasting life in Heaven.

We may understand from Nicodemus’ comments in verse 2 that He saw in Jesus a sign of the coming Messiah. In fact he may have believed Jesus to either be the Messiah or the prophet who would announce His coming. He is therefore courteous to Jesus, even complimentary. Perhaps he hopes to gain favor from Jesus so that he may have an important role in the Kingdom of God that the Messiah would bring. You see the Jews believed that the Messiah, when He came, would come as a conquering hero, a political leader and military conqueror who would free them from Roman control and establish Israel once again as a world power. But, in verse 3, Jesus immediately states His reason for coming, which is to provide people with the opportunity to be born again so that they may receive salvation and eternal life through the grace of God.

Nicodemus recognized that Jesus was a messenger from God and he wanted Jesus to know that he was interested in knowing what the message was and that he had a willingness to receive it.

I trust that each of you has also recognized who Jesus is, heard His message, and is willing to receive it into your own life so that you can be assured of eternal life today as well as in eternity. If there is anyone here who would like to be sure that you are born again, please feel free to speak to us personally after the service or call or email us during the week.