

The Gospel of John

Nicodemus Visits Jesus - John 3:1-15

***1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;
2 this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."***

Chapter 1 had introduced us to Jesus' omniscience through His insight into the life and thoughts of Nathanael (Jn. 1:47 ff.). The same truth comes out in John 2:25 when it says that Jesus "*knows what was in man*". The story of Nicodemus is closely connected to 2:25 in that Nicodemus becomes an example of a *man* whose innermost being Jesus knew.

Nicodemus is introduced as a *ruler* of the Jews, which almost certainly means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing body in Israel, composed of Priests (Sadducees), Pharisees, Scribes, and some tribal lay leaders. Considering his position, it is remarkable that he came to Jesus at all for a person of such stature would not likely make the effort to go to talk to an unknown, relatively young teacher of Galilee who had no formal rabbinic training (Jn. 7:15).

It appears that Nicodemus had either seen or heard of the miraculous signs that Jesus had been performing during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Jn. 2:23) and concluded that this was evidence that Jesus was a teacher sent from God ("for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him"- Jn. 3:2).

The actual things that Nicodemus wanted to talk about are only a deduction. Some suggest that he may have come to find some sort of criteria with which he could evaluate Jesus to see if His claim to be Messiah through the cleansing of the temple (Jn. 2:13-22) was valid. Jesus, however, rejected the evaluation and began to probe into Nicodemus' qualifications for assessing "heavenly things."

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

Nicodemus had claimed "to know" something of spiritual things (Jn. 3:2), but Jesus' response demonstrates that Nicodemus knows very little. He tells Nicodemus he must be born again if he desires to enter the kingdom of God.

4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

Some think that Nicodemus' response indicates that he had no idea what Jesus was talking about, and so he responds in a crassly literal way. Yet, it is hard to believe that the teacher of Israel (v.10) would be unfamiliar with metaphoric language when the OT is filled with it. It is probably better to see Nicodemus'

question as expressing doubt – he thinks Jesus is promising too much. In essence he is asking, “Is such a new birth possible?” OT prophecy had predicted that Messiah would come and transform society, ruling the nations with a rod of iron, so outward transformation is understandable. But the transformation of heart, the starting of a new life that Jesus speaks of – how can that be done? (Carson). Therefore, Jesus repeats Himself in OT phraseology that Nicodemus should understand.

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

Verses 3 and 5 are parallel thoughts; to be born again means to have a water/spirit birth. This should clarify for Nicodemus what Jesus meant by “born again”, for the OT used the image of water to picture God cleansing His people from sin, and it also spoke of Him creating a new spirit within them. In Ezekiel 36:25-27 God had said, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.”

If this is what Jesus is alluding to, then the word “spirit” in John 3:5 should not be capitalized in English for it is not the Holy Spirit that is in view. God is spirit (Jn. 4:24), and man must share in His nature to have life. It is the impartation of this “spirit” that signals a new birth. In other words, to be “born again” means that man is given a new existence that comes through the cleansing of sin and the impartation of the life of God. Men who are dead in their trespasses and sins need the inner renewal spoken of in Ezekiel (Ezek. 11:19-20).

NOTE: The phrase “born of water and the Spirit” (NAS) has been interpreted in many different ways. In the end note I give some reasons why I decided that the above interpretation is most likely.

***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.'***

Verses 6 and 7 elaborate on verse 5 even further. As in verse 5, the Holy Spirit is still not in view yet; rather, the emphasis is on the transferal of essence from one thing to another (see Westcott, 111). In other words, the principle being taught is that the nature of the one born is the same as the parent; flesh nature begets flesh nature, so spirit nature begets spirit nature (+ Alford, 715- II Cor. 3:18; Dods, 714).

Spirit and flesh represent two spheres of life; the sphere of God on the one side and the sphere of unregenerate man on the other (Jn. 3:6; 6:63). “By the flesh, in the doctrinal portions of Scripture, is never, unless the word be limited by the context, meant merely our sensuous nature, but our fallen nature, i.e., our nature as it is in itself, apart from the Spirit of God. As our Lord says (John 3:6), ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’” (Hodge, Systematic Theology, III, 226)

The Bible says that Christians are not merely as God's rational creatures, but are subjects of a new birth. We are children of God, sons of God, born of God, and in the verses that follow, Jesus will say that we are born of the Holy Spirit. As Hodge points out, "The essential idea in such representations is that of communication of life" (Hodge, Systematic Theology, II 702-703). Since we need spiritual life to enter the Kingdom of God, and flesh can only produce offspring of flesh, Nicodemus should not marvel that a spiritual birth is necessary.

8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

In verse 8 Jesus describes the means of the new birth by drawing an analogy between the working of the Holy Spirit and the wind. The wind blows here and there, yet no one knows where it comes from or where it will blow next. Though the wind itself cannot be seen, the waving branches of a tree or the clouds scudding along leave a witness to the unseen power that affects them. In the same way, though no one can see the Spirit of God, the action of the Spirit in the believer's life leaves a witness of His working. The believer shows by deed and word that an invisible force has influenced him (cf. Mk. 4:26-29).

"The wind is free. It obeys its own secret laws, not ours . . . Surely this verse is meant to show us that we are utterly at the mercy of the free and sovereign Spirit of God. He blows where he wills" (Piper, Sermon).

"As it is utterly incongruous to think of a creature's begetting itself, or originating its own life . . . so is it utterly inconsistent with the Scriptures to regard regeneration as a man's own work, or as due to his cooperation, or as produced by the influences of truth. As well might it be assumed that light, heat, and moisture could make a dead seed germinate, and bring forth fruit. All beginning of life is directly from God; and this is what the Bible most explicitly asserts to be true of regeneration. Those who become the children of God are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1:13; Hodge, Systematic Theology, II 702-703).

Our inability to direct the moving of the Spirit so that we may receive new life should lead us to a sense of desperation, for unless He wills, we are helpless to save ourselves. But it is this sense of desperation that God often uses to bring us to life.

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?"

Unfortunately, Nicodemus' preoccupation with the things familiar to him prevented new insight. Intellectually, he most likely understood what Jesus was saying; he understood the movement of the wind, he understood the analogy to the Holy Spirit, but he couldn't understand how these could be true. He remained in the same condition that he was in before meeting the Savior.

Jesus is astounded that the teacher of Israel who was steeped in knowledge of the OT Scriptures, could not accept such basic truths. He should have known that he could not come to God by his own strength or righteousness (Morris, 221), and should have seen that Jesus' teaching was not innovation, but came from the Hebrew Scriptures themselves (Bruce, 86).

11 "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness.

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

13 And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man."

Jesus now rebukes Nicodemus. His logic flows from lesser to greater – from the knowledge of things discernible on earth to the knowledge of the things hidden in the heavens.

Though the new birth is spiritual in nature, it can also be called earthly because it has been revealed to men, and has been exhibited upon the earth, and verified by human experience. Nicodemus' knowledge of spiritual things could not progress without God's intervention into his life; if he couldn't see spiritual truth when disclosed on earth, he surely could not understand those deeper truths closed to human observation.

Men may not receive heavenly things, but Christ was qualified to teach them for He alone has come from heaven (Jn. 1:1, 11, 14). This fact alone separates Jesus from all of mankind.

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

15 that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life."

By way of illustration, He reminds Nicodemus of the disobedience of Israel spoken of in Numbers 21:4-9. There, it is said that the people became impatient with their wilderness journey and complained against God. As a result, God sent poisonous snakes among them and many died. To bring healing to those who had been bitten, Moses was commanded by God to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. The Israelite's faith in God was expressed by looking at the serpent. Those who looked, received new life (physical life). Those who didn't look, died. In the same way, God will graciously give life (eternal life) to all who "look at" the Son of Man in faith. Though the means of this lifting up (the cross) was not immediately clear to Nicodemus, he no doubt realized that Jesus was at least saying that He would be the source of life to those who looked at Him with faith.

John's Reflection on Jesus' Words - John 3:16-21

John 3:16-21 moves from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus to John's own reflections on the things Jesus said. John sets forth the universal application that the interaction with Nicodemus teaches (Bruce, 89).

By way of explanation, the change in speakers is evident for a number of reasons: (1) the dialogue framework is dropped (Bernard I, 117), (2) past tenses are used (+ Dods, 717; Westcott, 119; Bernard I, 117), (3) the expression "only-begotten Son" is never used on Jesus' lips, but is a common expression of John (+ Dods, 717; Westcott, 119; Bernard I, 117), (4) the thoughts seem to be explanatory rather than progressive (Dods, 717) and, (5) verse 16 begins with words in Greek (Οὕτως γὰρ) that are in accordance with John's style when he is making a comment (Westcott, 120; Bernard I, 117).

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The fact that verse 16 is sandwiched between verses 14-15 and 17, shows that God giving His Son is related to both the Son's death (14-15) and His incarnation (17) (Carson, 206).

The word used here for world is *kosmos* (κόσμος) in Greek. It appears 185 times in the NT, 78 of which are in the writings of John (the Gospel of John, I, II, III John, and Revelation). John uses the word with a fairly broad range of meaning.

1) The world can refer to *the universe at large*.

Basically, the word denotes an ornament (I Pet. 3:3). It is the basis of our word "cosmetic." The universe with all its harmonious relationships is the outstanding ornament, and thus the term came to refer to the universe at large. It is probably this use that we see in John 1:10: "the world was made through Him" (cf. Jn. 1:3). It is likely that when Christ is referred to as the light of the world (8:12; 9:5), or as coming or being sent into the world (3:17; 11:27, etc.), that it is the universe at large that is meant (Morris, 126).

2) The world can mean *the majority of people*, or a large number of people.

In John 12:19 it says, "the whole world has gone after Him."

3) It is both the *earthly system and the people in that system who are opposed to God*.

In the vast majority of passages, "the world" has negative overtones (Jn. 1:10; 7:7; 14:17, 22, 27, 30; 15:18-19; 16:8, 20, 33; 17:6, 9, 14). The world is hostile toward Christ and hates Christ's followers. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you" (Jn. 15:18). The world rejoices when the disciples are lamenting (Jn. 16:20). The world is blind (Jn. 1:10) and doesn't know the

Father (Jn. 17:25); it cannot receive or know the Spirit (Jn. 14:17). In line with this, there are several passages that speak of the evil one as the "prince of this world" or the like (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; also see II Cor. 4:4; Morris, 127).

4) The world is *an object of God's love*.

God loves the world (Jn. 3:16). Christ speaks to the world of the things that He heard from God (Jn. 8:26). The whole work of salvation which God accomplishes in Christ is directed to the world. Thus, He takes away the sin of the world (6:33), gives His flesh for the world (6:51), and is said to come to save the world (Jn. 3:17; 12:47). His success is seen in His overthrow of Satan, the prince of the world (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 15:11). The victory remains with Christ (Jn. 16:33), but this does not alter the fact that the world is opposed Him (Morris, 128).

When John tells us that God so loved the world (Jn. 3:16), it is far from endorsing the world, rather, it is a testimony of the character of God. God's love isn't admired because the world is so big, but because it is so bad.

The great American theologian, B.B. Warfield, beautifully explains the meaning of this verse:

"The marvel . . . which the text brings before us is . . . the marvel of God's love for sinners. And this is the measure by which we are invited to measure the greatness of the love of God. It is not that it is so great that it is able to extend over the whole of a big world: it is so great that it is able to prevail over the Holy God's hatred and abhorrence of sin. For herein is love, that God could love the world - the world that lies in the evil one: that God who is all-holy and just and good, could so love this world that He gave His only begotten Son for it, - that He might not judge it, but that it might be saved" (B. B. Warfield, 515-16).

Some think that the world composes two groups, believers and unbelievers. But in John's usage, κόσμος comprises no believers at all. Prior to faith, all people are unbelievers and hostile toward God; the elect are just as much a part of the world as the non-elect. Those who come to faith are said to no longer be of the world; they have been chosen out of the world (Jn. 15:19). If Jesus is the Savior of the world, it says a great deal about Jesus but nothing of the world; it tells us that the world is in need of a Savior (Carson, 123).

The whole debate of whether the love spoken of here is a love toward all men or is the love for the elect alone who are chosen out of the world lies outside of the immediate scope of the passage and does not supply any key to its interpretation. "The passage was not intended to teach, and certainly does not teach, that God loves all men alike and visits each and every one alike with the same manifestations of His love: . . . [nor] was it intended to teach or does it teach that His love is confined to a few especially chosen individuals selected out of the world. What it is intended to do is to arouse in our hearts a

wondering sense of the marvel and the mystery of the love of God for the sinful world — conceived, here, not quantitatively but qualitatively as, in its very distinguishing characteristic, sinful" (B. B. Warfield, 516).

In other words, though God has a *special* love for His people, this does not mean that He cannot or does not love others as well. Prior to their salvation, the elect were in no greater position to respond to God than any other unbeliever. There was nothing in them that caused God to love them more than anyone else. They were "the world," hostile to God and Christ, and without hope. But God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. It is God's love for sinful humanity that makes it possible for some (the elect) to be saved.

(see note 2 below for a brief explanation on how "whoever believes" fits with the concept of limited atonement).

17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.

18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

The "for" that begins verse 17 tells us that John is going to clarify the mission of Christ.

Christ's coming and death demonstrates the love of God for the sinner in that it provides salvation for him (Ro. 5:8). This is the reason God sent His Son.

Though Christ didn't come to judge the world, nevertheless, His coming resulted in judgment, for those who reject Christ are judged even more severely for their willful rejection of the Savior. The *process of this judgment* is described in the verses that follow (Beasley-Murray; Morris 233 n. 85).

19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil.

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

21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.

Verses 19-21 describe the process of judging and show that men love their wickedness over Christ.

This is how the judgment works: The coming of Christ brings light (revelation about God) into the world and exposes men's wickedness. But instead of repenting and turning to Christ to be saved, men cut Christ out and retreat into deeper darkness. They do this because they love the darkness and do not want their wickedness to be exposed. Their choice demonstrates what they love most. Men have judged themselves by showing where their affections lie in the willful decisions they have made.

All men face judgment (Jn. 5:29), but the judgment simply confirms the choices that people have made. There will be no contradiction between what God accuses men of and the desires that men have. God does not need to convince people that they hate the light, they already know it; their hatred of the light is instinctive; their “not coming” is deliberate.

In contrast, the one who accepts the truth comes to the light. Coming to the light is evidence that God has produced good works in him. The NIV paraphrases this verse well: “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” The thought is somewhat analogous to John 15. There Jesus says “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:4-5). Bearing fruit shows that we are attached to the vine. Since coming to the light is a work of God, there is no basis for boasting.

NOTE 1: Interpretations of the expression “born of water and spirit” – John 3:5

The meaning behind Jesus’ words “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5) has many different interpretations. In order to save paper and avoid over-complexity I have only listed the cons of other views and pros of my own view, however, all the views have their strengths and weaknesses. A complete analysis, including the strengths and weaknesses of each view, is available if you desire to have one.

VIEW 1: It is the baptism of John.

CONS

- This view presupposes that John’s ministry was so well known that a mere mention of water would conjure up his baptism (Carson, 193). If so, the response of Nicodemus (“How can this be?”) was inappropriate (3:9).
- Where John’s baptism is mentioned, the context stresses the relative unimportance of the rite (1:23, 26; 3:23, 30) (Carson, 193).
- If it was John’s baptism, wouldn’t this imply that Jesus was making it a requirement to enter the kingdom even though it was soon to be superseded by Christian baptism? (Carson, 193).
- Two nouns without the article, joined by *καί* as objects of the same preposition suggest that there are not two separate concepts being spoken of, but two aspects of one concept (Kent, 59). Since *ἐκ* governs both terms, they are inseparable (Plummer, 102). The two terms cover one entity (Dods, 713); therefore, it can’t be John’s baptism and the Spirit.
- The water is not an agency of new birth; it is a symbol of cleansing. The same idea is in Ezekiel 36:25-27 (Dods, 713).

View 2: This is a reference to Christian water baptism and spiritual birth (Bernard I, 104).

CONS

- If it's baptism, why is water mentioned only once by Jesus in the three parallel demands for entering the Kingdom (vv. 3, 5, 7)? (RWP).
- Jesus was not trying to mystify, but to enlighten. Yet, if He were speaking of Christian baptism His words would have had no relevance to the historical Nicodemus (Morris, 218) for Christian baptism didn't exist until after Jesus' ascension.
- The whole emphasis of the passage is on the Spirit's work, not the church's rite (Morris, 218).

VIEW 3: This is physical birth (the water refers to coming in a sack of water) in contrast to the birth of the Holy Spirit; Jesus is saying natural birth (by water) is not enough; one must be born of the Spirit also.

CONS

- No ancient sources refer to natural birth as "from water" (Carson, 191).
- The Greek construction does not favor two births (Carson, 191). The preposition (ἐκ) governs both terms, which means that they are inseparable (Plummer, 102). The two terms cover one entity (Dods, 713), not two.
- The whole expression "of water and the spirit" is equivalent to "from above" in verse 3, and thus it is a reference to one birth not two (Carson, 191).
- If water means physical birth, it's difficult to make any sense out of it (Morris, 216). It was hardly necessary for Jesus to tell Nicodemus that in order to be born again he had to first be born physically (Kent, 59).

VIEW 4: (the view I believe to be correct) Water refers to the eschatological cleansing promised by the OT prophets. "Spirit" (πνεύματος) is not the Holy Spirit but God's spirit, that is, the principle of life which comes from God. It is the impartation of God's nature as spirit that signals a new birth. The total phrase is the same as the "new heart" in Ezekiel which also signifies inner renewal. Thus, this phrase denotes cleansing from impurity and transformation of heart. In short, it's the new birth that cleanses and renews (Carson, 194 ff.) Unless one's heart is cleansed and the life of God is imparted to him he cannot enter the kingdom.

PROS

- OT usage of water when used figuratively refers to cleansing from idolatry and disobedience (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27; Isa 1:16). In Ezek. the picture is of cleansing and a transformation of heart (Carson, 195; Feinberg, Ezek. 209) which is practically synonymous with the new spirit.
- This is the same as being born from above, but in OT phraseology that Nicodemus would understand - Ezek. 36:26, 27 (Bruce, 84). This was applied in the valley of dry bones in Ezek. 37:9 (Carson, 194; Bruce, 84; Plummer, 102; Bruce goes on to then apply it to John's baptism and Christian baptism).

- The spirit is seen as God's principle of life (Gen. 2:7; 6:3; Job. 34:14) which was poured out on mankind (Joel 2:28) with a result of inner cleansing (Carson, 194, 195).
- Since Nicodemus had to know about it, it seems inescapable that Jesus was referring to the OT (Kent, 59).
- Two nouns without the article, joined by *καί* as objects of the same preposition suggest that there are not two separate concepts being spoken of, but two aspects of one concept (Kent, 59). Since *ἐκ* governs both terms, they are inseparable (Plummer, 102). The two terms cover one entity (Dods, 713). Therefore, it can't be a combination of things. It's a conceptual unit (Carson).

NOTE 2: John 3:16 and the doctrine of limited atonement

When we speak of **limited atonement** we do not mean that a limit can be set on the value or power of the atonement which Christ made; we mean that God not only made salvation possible, He applies salvation to those whom He has chosen. Though Christ's death is powerful enough to save everyone (Heb. 2:9; I Tim. 4:10), it is limited in who it actually does save (not all benefit from it). In other words, Christ's death was sufficient for all men, but it is only applied to a *limited* number - those who God has chosen - therefore, the expression "limited" atonement.

The opposite of limited atonement is the doctrine called **unlimited atonement** which teaches that Jesus died for mankind without exception. In other words, God made salvation *possible* for everyone; therefore, there are no limits on who can believe through faith. This view works from the assumption that all men have the ability to respond to the gospel without any direct divine intervention. If everyone is capable of believing, then the atonement is unlimited (potentially) in who can be saved.

We believe in limited atonement, but some (including myself) feel that "limited redemption" is a better term. The power of the atonement is unlimited; the limitation comes in when we consider that only the redeemed benefit from it.

If the Bible teaches that only those whom God has chosen will be saved, the question then arises as to how John can say, "whoever believes in Him will be saved." Doesn't that imply that everyone can be saved?

If we look at John 3:16 carefully we will realize that it only tells us two things:

1. God loves the unbelieving world so much that He gave His only Son
2. whoever believes will receive life

John 3:16 says nothing of *how* those who believe come to their belief; it only tells us that everyone who does believe receives life. However, other places in the Book of John tell us how men come to faith.

- John 3:21 says that he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. In other words, if anyone comes to the light is

men recognize that their deeds are from God. Coming to the light is a result of the work of God.

- In John 3:8 we read that the Spirit is the source of the new birth. It also says that He blows where He wishes— that is, He is the one who determines who will be born again. Salvation is limited to those who the Spirit sovereignly chooses to “blow upon.”
- In John 6:44 Jesus tells us that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him. If it is impossible for anyone to turn to Christ apart from the work of the Father, then salvation must be limited to those whom God has decides to draw.

The difference between John 3:16 and these verses is that John 3:16 tells us that faith is necessary to have life while the other verses tell us how this faith comes into existence.

In other words, everyone who believes will indeed be saved but men don't believe naturally (men love the darkness rather than the light). Though the message of salvation is available to all men, it will be unanimously rejected by all men apart from the work of God. Those who believe do so because they are the ones whom God has drawn to Christ. God so loved the world that He sent His Son to make the salvation of sinners possible. God so loves the elect that He draws them to Christ, overcoming their rebellion and resistance to Him. . . *“God . . . is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ”* (2 Cor. 4:6); we cannot see the glory of God in Christ in any other way.