

## 11. BORN FROM ABOVE (3:1-15)

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. There is the tendency in the modern church to differentiate between Christian and born again Christian. Is this differentiation correct? Explain your answer.
  
2. What can we learn of Nicodemus from the following verses from the Gospel of John?
  - 2.1. John 3:1
  - 2.2. John 3:10
  - 2.3. John 7:45-52
  - 2.4. John 19:38-42

### NICODEMUS

The name Nicodemus was very common in Greek (*Nikodēmos*, from *nikos*, “victorious” and *dēmos*, “public, people”, so together means “conqueror of the people”) but was also transliterated and made into a Hebrew name. John is the only book that mentions Nicodemus, and he does so three times (cp. 7:50; 19:39).

From the text, only two things are known for certain; he was “*a ruler of the Jews*” (v1), and a “*teacher of Israel*” (v10).

“*A ruler of the Jews*” means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest national body in charge of Jewish affairs. Head-quartered in Jerusalem, it was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. When Judah became a Roman province in AD 6, the Sanhedrin became even more autonomous in handling internal Jewish matters. As the Gospel progresses, the Sanhedrin becomes the driving force behind the plot to kill Jesus. Given that Nicodemus is “*a man of the Pharisees*” he would not have been as bothered about the clearing of the temple than the Sadducees would be.<sup>44</sup>

The Pharisees were a select group – never more than 6,000. Each one took a solemn vow before three witnesses that he would devote every moment of his life to obeying the Ten Commandments as a way of pleasing God. In order to be specific it was deemed necessary to define how the commandments were to be applied to certain situations. This gave rise to the scribes, members of the Pharisees, who spent their lives studying the Ten Commandments and applying them to situations of life so that the Pharisees could carry out these commands and thus obey God. In doing this they compiled a very thick book, which the Jews still have today, called the *Mishnah* – the section on keeping the Sabbath occupies twenty-four chapters alone. They also wrote a second book, the *Talmud*, which is a commentary on the *Mishnah* – here 156 pages are devoted to keeping the Sabbath.

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44 Kostenberger, Andreas J. 2004. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, p118.

Extra-biblical sources identify Nicodemus with a wealthy citizen of Jerusalem named Naqdimon ben Gorion who is known to have lived in Jerusalem at the time of the Roman siege (AD 70). However, as Carson points out this would have made him too young to serve as a member of the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus. Verse 4 also seems to imply that Nicodemus was already getting on in years at the time.<sup>45</sup> Nicodemus later sides with Jesus (7:45-52) and is also present at the crucifixion (19:38-42). It is understood from church history that he went on to be an integral part of the New Testament local church after Christ's ascension.

Many commentators suggest that Nicodemus comes to faith sometime during Jesus' life, even speaking boldly for Him in 7:45-52 and bringing over thirty kilograms of embalming spices after Jesus' death. However, as Kostenberger points out, nowhere is the word "believe" connected with him anywhere in the gospel. Given the fact that the verses immediately preceding this account speak of those who do not have saving faith in Christ, perhaps John is implying that Nicodemus is like one of them. There is also no progression in the way that Nicodemus is characterised. He comes across almost like a fan rather than a true disciple. One commentator describes him as a man with one foot in each world.<sup>46</sup>

### THE NEED TO BE BORN AGAIN (VV1-3)

One word that stands out right at the beginning of Nicodemus' words is "we". Who are the "we" that he is referring to? Is it the Sanhedrin? Is it used in the sense of a "royal we", that he is grouping himself with others who are also drawn to Jesus generally, such as those mentioned in 2:23-25? Or does he come with others who are curious, and he is speaking for them too? Although John's account focusses on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, there is the possibility that others accompany him, as in verses 11 and 12, the Greek for "you" is in the plural.<sup>47</sup> The text is not clear either way, but in truth, it is not important. I say this because of Jesus' initial answer, "*Truly, truly, I say to you*", the you here in the Greek is singular – Jesus addresses Nicodemus alone. Essentially Jesus is saying, do not worry about what the others say or think about me (including any that may have accompanied him), but worry about yourself. You need to understand these things, and your relationship has to be right with the Father. This answer is similar to Jesus' answer to Peter in 21:22 when Peter asked how John would die – "*what is that to you? You follow me!*".

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night (v2). It is unclear why John states this with several possible reasons being suggested by various commentators:<sup>48</sup>

1. John is simply providing an historical detail. We have already seen that he has paid attention to numbering days and naming specific events (i.e. the passover).
2. The Rabbis were known to study well into the night, and so Nicodemus may have come to Jesus following on such night of studying.
3. Nicodemus is taking advantage of the darkness to avoid being seen by the other Rabbis or others who could recognise him.

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45 Carson, p186.

46 Kostenberger, p118.

47 Kostenberger, p117.

48 Carson, p186. Keener, p269.

4. Due to curfews instituted by Rome, Jews were meant to be indoors at night, so perhaps Nicodemus is taking advantage of Jesus possibly not being surrounded by others.
5. Nicodemus is simply being cautious, visiting Jesus at a time when no-one should see him so as not to be seen associating or endorsing Jesus before he has checked if He is legitimate or not.
6. John is using it metaphorically to present Nicodemus' spiritual darkness. This is based on John using the word "night" five times in his gospel, and each time it is associated with people who are in spiritual darkness.

We cannot determine which of the above is correct or more probable, as reasonable cases can be made for each one. However, given John's writing style in how he interplays images with reality (e.g. "*the Lamb of God*", the temple, etc.) perhaps all five, or a combination of two or three, are possible, especially if indeed Nicodemus is not a believer. Interestingly, John points out the fact that he comes to Jesus at night again in 19:39, possibly highlighting the flatness of his character.<sup>49</sup> In keeping with Jewish culture, Nicodemus starts with a word of praise before starting by stating that he recognises Jesus is a "*teacher come from God*". This is not a confession of Jesus' deity, but rather that He comes with authority that can only come from God, such as the Old Testament prophets did (cp. Exo. 3:12; Jer. 1:19). Although Nicodemus may be drawn to Jesus for the right reasons, he still has a long way to go to fully understand Jesus' true nature. Nevertheless, it appears that Nicodemus is more open than the rest of the Sanhedrin.<sup>50</sup>

Nicodemus singles out Jesus' signs, specifically those performed during the Passover (cf. 2:23) rather than others that may have gone before, such as the wine in Cana and those recorded in the other gospels. It was common in Judaism that miracles meant God's presence (cp. Exo. 4:1-9; Isa. 20:3). Although Jesus performs signs that confirm His divinity, He discourages people from pursuing the signs alone.<sup>51</sup>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. In Matthew 12:39 when asked for a sign by the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus answered, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign*". Within the modern church, many chase apparent signs and wonders at churches, crusades, and so-called revivals. How does Jesus' words in Matthew 12 and in the Gospel of John challenge that behaviour?

Although John does not ask Jesus a specific question, the scepticism behind his words is apparent, and as Westcott points out, "The Lord answered not his words, but his thoughts ... to reveal the true thought of the questioner, and to be fitted to guide him to the truth which he is seeking".<sup>52</sup>

Jesus answers with His customary "*Truly, truly*". This statement is one that challenges the hearer's preconceived ideas. Although Nicodemus, and indeed many others, seek truth, they are not necessarily seeking the truth but their idea of it. They are seeking an answer that satisfies their curiosity and expresses it in a way that they are comfortable with, which is not necessarily what the truth actually is. In

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49 Kostenberger, p120.

50 Kostenberger, p120.

51 Kostenberger, p121.

52 Westcott in Kostenberger, p121.

this case, Jesus challenges the process by which Nicodemus seeks to discover Jesus – observation, reasoning, belief – to replace it with the right way, which is by being “*born again*”.

Jesus uses the term “*kingdom of God*” here and in 18:36 in the present instance. Elsewhere in the gospels when He refers to it, it looks forward to the coming kingdom. This means that Jesus is stating that “*kingdom of God*” is something that can be realised or experienced in the present, and is not only for the future. How is this possible? It is possible because Jesus is equating the “*kingdom of God*” with eternal life. This is suggested by their parallel use in Matthew 19:16 and 24.<sup>53</sup>

“*The kingdom of God*” as an expression does not appear in the Old Testament. However several passages speak of the Lord’s Kingdom or speak of the Lord reigning (e.g. Exo. 15:8; Psa. 93:1; 103:19). In each case, these texts speak of God’s absolute sovereignty. There is, however, a sense of the future coming Kingdom in passages like Isaiah 9.<sup>54</sup>

Without being born again, no one can “*see the kingdom of God*”. “*See*”, as it is used in the New Testament refers, to participate. So here Jesus is saying that no-one can participate in the kingdom of heaven unless one is born again.<sup>55</sup> Jews in Jesus’ day presumed that they will all get to see the kingdom of God based on them being the chosen nation. However, Jesus is challenging this thinking – cultural or religious heritage by physical birth will not give one entry into the kingdom. Therefore, the only way it is possible to experience eternal life in both this life and the life to come, is by being born again.

The word Jesus uses a word for “*again*” in the Greek has multiple meanings. It can mean as it is translated as, “*again*” as if to do something a second time. It can also mean to begin over, as in a new beginning. But it can also mean “*from above*”, which is the sense it is used here and in other places in Scripture, including the Old Testament, such as in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 11 and 36. Being “*born again*”, or “*from above*” literally means being born of God – “*above*” was a Jewish circumlocution (a roundabout expression) for God.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus challenge your understanding of being born again and eligibility into the kingdom of God?
2. Would you consider yourself to be born again? Why do you say that?
3. How can you help others understand the concept of being born again in the modern context?

## THE MEANS OF BEING BORN AGAIN (VV4-8)

Jesus’ statement is a surprise to Nicodemus as he misunderstands Jesus and takes His words literally. But in reality, it should not be surprising to him (cf. 3:10), because the inner transformation of a person’s life

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53 Kostenberger, p123.

54 Carson, pp188-189.

55 Carson, p188.

is found in several Old Testament prophetic passages (See Jer. 31:33-34; Eze. 11:1-20; 36:25-27). Furthermore, converts to Judaism were said to start life anew and become as “newborn children” when they were baptised to remove Gentile impurity. Even if the term “*born in water*” stood alone, it should clarify for Nicodemus that “*born again*” means a conversion, not a second physical birth. Jewish teachers generally spoke of converts to Judaism as “newborn” only in the sense that they were severed from old relationships, whereas an actual rebirth by the Spirit would produce a new heart (Eze. 36:26).<sup>56</sup> Roman culture had a similar law where adopted sons relinquished all legal status in their former family when they became part of a new one.<sup>57</sup>

Because of Nicodemus’ naïvety, Jesus goes on to explain using the phrase, “*born of water and the Spirit*”. This is a phrase that has been interpreted in various erroneous ways. The two most frequent interpretations are:

- **Two types of birth:** “*born of water*” referring to physical birth, and “*born of ... the Spirit*” to refer to spiritual birth. This interpretation comes from the modern understanding of the amniotic fluid that exits the womb during childbirth, or to the semen needed for procreation. However, there are no sources in the ancient world that use “*born of water*” as a picture of childbirth, be it amniotic fluid or semen. Furthermore, the Greek construction does not favour a two birth interpretation.<sup>58</sup>
- **Two types of baptism:** “*born of water*” referring to water baptism like that conducted by John, and “*born of ... the Spirit*” to refer to baptism by the Holy Spirit. This interpretation does not fit the context because it would imply that Nicodemus – and indeed everyone else thereafter – first needs to be baptised in water to see the kingdom of God. It would also exclude the second thief on the cross who Jesus promised would be with Him in heaven, yet he was not baptised in water, nor in the Holy Spirit as it is before the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Also, the emphasis here is not on human ritual observance.<sup>59</sup>

However, apart from the reasons given above as to why these interpretations are wrong, the Greek construction of the phrase does not allow either interpretation. This is even well illustrated even in our English Bible. Note how the word “*of*” is used, “*born of water and the Spirit*”, and not “*born of water and of the Spirit*”. Granted, in English there is typically only one “*of*” in a sentence like this, but in the Greek, there is a difference in meaning when one or two are used. When one is used, as it is here, it means that the conjunctive phrase that comes after it, “*water and the Spirit*” is a single expression. Therefore, we cannot split this phrase into two as if to imply that there are two births. This means that Jesus is stating that being “*born again*” is equivalent to being “*born of water and the Spirit*”.

But why does Jesus use this phrase to explain the other? The answer is found in Ezekiel 36:25-27, which is the closest parallel we have to Jesus words. Ezekiel 36 is a prophecy concerning the desolations of the

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56 Keener, p270, and Kostenberger, p123.

57 Keener, p270.

58 Carson, p191.

59 Kostenberger, p123.

land of Israel and their causes. It also speaks of the return of the people to the land and the fruitfulness and spiritual blessings that follow. But take a look at verses 25 to 27.

*“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”.*

Sprinkling of clean water in the Old Testament symbolises cleansing from sin and has nothing to do with baptism or physical birth. But note who is doing the cleansing here in Ezekiel – God. This is not someone entering the waters of baptism of their own accord. Nor is it a person being physically born like a newborn baby. No, God will purify Israel from her sins and God will give them new life. Hebrew scholars Keil and Delitzsch further state that this cleansing from sins corresponds to justification, that is, God legally declares a person righteous. This is therefore not an act of man, but man being cleansed by God.

However, declaring a person righteous does not make them holy in their everyday life. It simply declares them to be not guilty before God and therefore treated as holy. This is where the Spirit comes in in verse 27 as God’s Spirit comes to dwell in the hearts of His people.

So the correct interpretation of this phrase is not to take it as two separate births, but rather that it is a single expression that explains the *“born again”* in verse 3. To be *“born again”*, to be *“born of water and the Spirit”* means that God declares the sinner righteous and puts His Holy Spirit into the person so that one can live a righteous life.<sup>60</sup>

In verses 6 and 7, Jesus provides further support for this and says that the only way it is possible for someone to be spiritually born again is by the Holy Spirit, because if we try it in our flesh, that is, in our sinful condition, we will only give birth to that which is sinful. *“Flesh”* here refers to human nature. Natural human birth produces people who belong to the earthly family of mankind, but not to the children of God. Only the Spirit can give birth to spirit (cp. Eze.36:27). Only He can remove our heart of stone – which is the dead heart of the sinful nature – and will replace it with a heart of flesh – that is a living heart that is of the Spirit.

However, the decision of who will be *“born of water and the Spirit”* is ultimately God’s, as seen in the wind analogy in verse 8. In the same way that the wind is unpredictable and uncontrollable by man (cf. Ecc. 1:6, 8, 14, 17; 2:11, 17, 25; 4:4, 6, 16;6:9; 8:8), the movement of the Holy Spirit is also. Being *“born again”* is a work of God. It is not something you can do or cause, nor ask someone to do for you. It is God who initiates and accomplishes the task.

**Note:** Water also refers to the Living Water, which is Christ, who came to die to cleanse us from our sin. Also, the Spirit is also symbolised by wind in Ezekiel 37, which some Jewish interpreters link with Genesis

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60 Carson, pp. 191-196

2:7 (cf. John 20:22).<sup>61</sup> Both further strengthens the above interpretation of the meaning of “*born of water and the Spirit*”.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does the above explanation of being “*born of water and the Spirit*” challenge what you have previously understood about this phrase?
2. How can you apply the analogy of the wind in understanding the work of the Holy Spirit?

## THE MYSTERY OF BEING BORN AGAIN (VV9-13)

In verse 9 Nicodemus is still confused and Jesus is somewhat astonished by that, as seen by His reaction in verse 10. Despite Nicodemus being “*the teacher of Israel*” who has given his life to studying the Scriptures – the same Scriptures that Jesus is referring to – he still does not grasp what Jesus is saying.

So Jesus responds with another “*Truly, truly*” statement. This time He uses an Old Testament principle that Nicodemus should be familiar with, that of having two or three witnesses to verify the truth. The first witness Nicodemus has had his entire life, the Scriptures. The second is standing before Him, who is not just any witness, but the witness from heaven.<sup>62</sup>

Nicodemus even has a third witness, the people of Israel, who although perform sacrifices daily, are still wicked and are not living as though they have hearts of flesh. Something is wrong, and this should make Nicodemus realise that the nation still needs to be “*born of water and the Spirit*” like Ezekiel promised. Although they go through the motions, say all the right things, pray the right prayers, but their hearts are still far from God.

But then Jesus makes the following statement in verse 12 that strengthens what He has already stated, “*If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*”. This is an argument from the lesser to the greater (a *minori ad maius* argument) that in effect states that if Nicodemus can not understand elementary things that he can observe in the physical world, then how can he understand things that are spiritual and beyond the physical realm.

Now whether Jesus is referring to what He has already spoken about or of the things He’s yet to reveal is unclear – commentators vary on this. But irrespective of what it may refer to, the point that Jesus has already made that one cannot see the Kingdom of God unless one is born again, is strengthened here in that one cannot even begin to understand the things of heaven, never mind enter, unless one is born from above (cp. 1 Cor. 2:14). Nicodemus knows the law. He’s studied it his whole life. He knows what the prophets wrote about the Messiah. Yet even when the Messiah is standing in front of him, Nicodemus doesn’t recognise Him. And if he can’t grasp that, then how is he going to grasp anything else Jesus has to say.

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61 Keener, p270

62 Keener, p270



For Nicodemus, being born again is still a mystery. As it is still for most people in the world today. But hope is not lost, for now we come to the last two verses, verses 14 and 15

### THE BASIS OF BEING BORN AGAIN (VV14-15)

Here Jesus refers to a strange event that occurs during the Exodus not long before the people of Israel enter the Promised Land recorded in Numbers 21. There the people rebel against God and so He sends poisonous snakes into their camp to judge them. When Moses intercedes for the people, God instructs him to make a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole. Anyone who is then bitten by a snake and looks at the bronze serpent will live.

What Jesus is doing here is again arguing from the lesser to the greater, in that He uses the physical restoration of Israel in Numbers 21 that Nicodemus ought to understand, as a picture of spiritual restoration of His people when they will look upon Him as He is raised up on the cross.

In a sense, like we saw with Nathanael and last week when Jesus answers the Jews who ask for a sign after He clears the temple, it is as if Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, wait and see. That although he does not understand these things now, when Jesus dies on the cross Nicodemus' eyes will be opened and he will be spiritually restored.

As already mentioned, the indication in Scripture is that he is eventually born again, and Nicodemus becomes an example of everything that Jesus speaks about. At first, although he's drawn to Jesus because of His teachings and signs, he doesn't understand what should be plain to him. But then, when Jesus is crucified, Nicodemus looks upon the cross and he is spiritually restored. And it happens as Jesus said, according to the will of the Spirit that cannot be predicted or controlled.

Verse 15 closes this section with a promise "*that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*". This is a promise that is far greater than that found in Numbers 21. There the promise was only for those in the Israelite camp, but here it is for everyone. There is no limitation based on ethnicity, culture, tribe, language, or skin colour, everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life (cf. 3:16-18). God sent His Son to save not only Israel, but the whole world. For Nicodemus this promise would have been startling, for Israel had for generations believed that salvation was for them alone (e.g. the *Qumran* sect of Judaism).

This is the answer to Nicodemus' opening statement (v2) and later question (v9) – salvation is not found in signs and wonders, but is contingent on believing in Jesus as He is lifted up on the cross. Yet even the believing is an act that is only possible for those who are born again.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Read John 3:16-18. What is their connection to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus? How does 3:1-15 build on your understanding of 3:16?
2. How does this encounter help us to reach those who do not believe today?