

# The Gospel of John

Text: John 3 — Born Again

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 51-68

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## Nicodemus Visits Jesus (3:1-21)

This text continues a series of chapters which establish the central themes and tensions of the entire Gospel: the possibilities of new life and faith made available through the words and works of Jesus, and the decisions individuals are called to in the face of those possibilities.

### A. A Conversation Between Nicodemus and Jesus

1. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was a teacher of the law and a member of the Jewish leadership that was questioning Jesus at the Jerusalem temple. His visit is motivated by what he has seen of Jesus' ministry (v. 2). The richness of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (and the later appearances of Nicodemus in John 7:45-52 and 19:38-42) show that Jesus' works and his words required all who met him to reevaluate where they looked for God's presence in the world.
2. This story also continues many of the themes that were introduced in John 1:1-18. Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night," but his visit nonetheless indicates an openness to the light of the world (1:4-5). Light symbolizes the presence of God; darkness and night, God's absence. The theme of "children of God" (1:12-13) surfaces again here, as the main theme in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is new birth and new life (3:3-8, 11-15).
3. Just like the disciples in chapter 1, Nicodemus is looking for something: he is trying to test how his previous understanding of God fits with what Jesus now does.

**Why did Nicodemus find Jesus' words so hard to believe? How do our preconceived notions about God sometimes keep us from embracing Jesus' message? (i.e. who's in/out)**

### B. Born From Above or Born Again?

1. The heart of Jesus' teaching is in his announcement that in order to enter the kingdom of God, one must be "born from above." Nicodemus assumes that Jesus is talking about physical rebirth and so he protests the impossibility of what Jesus is saying. Jesus, however, is talking metaphorically about a second birth that is also a rebirth "from above," from God, the source of all life.
2. Jesus tries to move Nicodemus out of his misunderstanding by redescribing the kind of birth he envisions with the phrase "born of water and Spirit" (v. 5). This phrase has double dimensions because "water" can evoke the waters of physical birth, and for Christian readers can also evoke the waters of baptism. New birth in baptism is a birth in the "spirit," a new birth from God.
3. Images of spiritual birth and physical birth go hand in hand, because flesh and spirit belong together in the new birth Jesus envisions. One is not reborn to a new life apart from the physical body; one is reborn to a new life within the physical body. In an important way, what Jesus offers Nicodemus is what Jesus himself models in the incarnation: God-made-present in the flesh.
4. As with 1:12-13, the point of this is that **God's kingdom is now open to all**. The Spirit is on the move, like a fresh breeze, and no human family, tribe, or system can keep up with it. Letting this breeze in can be very inconvenient, especially for people like Nicodemus who suppose they have all things sorted neatly and all people labeled correctly.

Nicodemus fades out of the conversation as the scene broadens in v. 11, but John 3 is not the end of Nicodemus' story in John. He appears two more times in the Gospel, and he remains an intriguing character.

Nicodemus appears again during a controversy with the Pharisees in chapter 7 and appeals to them on Jesus' behalf: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (7:50-51). Nicodemus is one of the few people to stick up for Jesus, even if his words are posed as a question. Nicodemus later appears alongside Joseph of Arimathea, who has permission to bury Jesus' body (19:39-40); together they give Jesus a grand burial.

- In vv. 10-13, we have the first of many passages in which Jesus speaks about a new knowledge — indeed a new sort of knowing. What do we learn about this new sort of knowing?
- How does John's Gospel suggest we will gain this new knowledge, and what difference will it make in our lives?

### C. More Clues to Understanding "Born From Above" (3:12-15)

1. Verses 12-15 give us more clues to understanding the metaphor "born from above/again" by contrasting the teaching of "earthly things" and "heavenly things" (v. 12). Jesus is uniquely the one who can bring heavenly things, because he has come down ("descended") to earth and will ascend at his "hour"—his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.
2. The reference to Moses in verse 14 (see Num 21:8-9) elaborates on the idea of the Son of Man's ascent. Just as the serpent was lifted up on a staff in the wilderness, the Son of Man will be "lifted up" on the cross.
3. "Lift up" can also mean "exalted" — this wordplay is theologically significant because through this one word **John communicates that Jesus' "lifting up on the cross" is at the same time the moment of his exaltation.** In John, Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are understood as one continuous event, which are regularly referred to in John by the phrase "glorified."

**How is the crucifixion of Jesus like putting the snake on a pole? How is this a peculiar demonstration of the greatness of God's love for the world (v. 16)?**

4. What John is saying, and will continue to say right up to his account of the crucifixion, is that the evil which was and is in the world, was somehow allowed to take out its full force on Jesus. When we look at him hanging on the cross, what we are looking at is the result of the evil in which we are all struck. And we are seeing what God has done about it.
5. The gift that comes from Jesus' ascent on the cross is "**eternal life.**" *Life* is an important term in John's Gospel. It is the most common word Jesus uses to describe the gift he brings to those who believe. "**Eternal life" does not speak of immortality or a future life in heaven, but is a metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God.** Jesus offer of his own life through being lifted up on the cross makes eternal life possible for those who believe.

- **Imagine you are Nicodemus: What stands out to you most when you hear Jesus' amazing new picture of God? In what ways are you challenged or encouraged by Jesus' message?**
- **Evil still longs to entice our hearts, and for healing to take place we must be involved in the process. That doesn't mean that we just have to try a lot harder to be good. What is required of us (vv. 18, 21)?**

The Gospel's language can be read as highly judgmental, but it is important to remember that first and foremost, John has in mind the believer's act of self-judgment. God has created the possibility of judgment and decision through God's sending of Jesus in love to and for the world.

For John, all that is asked of the world in return is to embrace that love. If one enters into that love, one enters into eternal life. If one chooses not to embrace that love, then one will not know the grace brought by the love.

## **Jesus and John the Baptist (3:22-36)**

### **A. John's Witness to Jesus**

1. John's witness to Jesus is prompted by a conversation between his disciples and a Jew. Their question links the this scene with chapter 1, in which John's own testimony about Jesus leads two of his disciples to follow Jesus (1:35-37).

### **What does John say to settle down his disciples about the success of Jesus?**

2. John's response shows his disciples that the success of Jesus' ministry is an occasion for joy, not complaint. John is the one who bears witness to the Messiah; he is not himself the Messiah.
3. John tells the bridegroom parable in order to illustrate how one can rejoice in someone else's happiness. This parable draws on OT imagery of Israel as God's bride (Isa 61:1-10; Hosea 1-2); John's ministry has been one of preparation for this marriage. The rise of Jesus' ministry marks the end of John's work as witness, and John will not appear again in the Gospel.
4. Altogether John's words and witness confirm what the reader already knows to be true about Jesus, and this reinforces the presentation of John as a valuable witness to Jesus.

- **Sometimes different churches or traditions are jealous of each other's successes. What does this passage have to teach us?**
- **Instead of 'family rivalries,' where do verses 31-36 say our focus should be?**

## **Reflection**

1. What word, phrase, or event stands out to you in this story?
2. What do you think the story is saying to the audience that originally received it?
3. What is the story saying to us today?
4. What is the story calling us to believe?
5. What is the story calling us to do?

## **Points for Home**

1. As with 1:12-13, the point of Jesus conversation with Nicodemus is that God's kingdom is now open to all. The Spirit is on the move, like a fresh breeze, and no human family, tribe, or system can keep up with it. This is good news!
2. In an important way, what Jesus offers Nicodemus is what Jesus himself models in the incarnation: God-made-present in the flesh. To be born again is what makes it possible for us to see the kingdom of God and to begin to reframe our understandings of God. It is the beginning point, not the endpoint, of growth with God.
3. Jesus offer of his own life through being lifted up on the cross makes eternal life possible for those who believe. "Eternal life" does not speak of immortality or a future life in heaven, but is a metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God.
4. For John, all that is asked of the world in return is to embrace the love offered to them by God in Christ. If one enters into that love, one enters into eternal life. If one chooses not to embrace that love, then one will not know the grace brought by the love.

## **Sources:**

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*

NT Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1*

R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*

Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel*