

John 3:1-21 You Must Be Born Again

Intro: John wrote his Gospel to convince unbelievers to come to faith in Jesus:

ESV **John 20:30-31** . . . these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.¹

Arguably, John was writing to Jewish unbelievers scattered throughout the Roman Empire (Hellenistic Jews). John's Gospel assumes the readers were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures—something that would not have been true of the typical Gentile living in the Roman Empire. Also, in his writing, John drew a sharp line between his readers (unbelieving Hellenistic Jews) and the Jews of Palestine who had already rejected Jesus.²

In a sense, evangelists like John had a public relations problem. The Judean religious rulers had officially rejected Jesus. On the whole, the Jewish people of Judea had rejected him. The Romans had executed Him as a revolutionary. Jews living outside Judea had doubtless heard rumors about Jesus, and John was writing to inform them who Jesus was, why Jesus had been rejected, and to convince them that Jesus really was the Messiah.

The Objective: Today we'll consider an interview between Jesus and the only Irishman in the Bible (Nick O'Demus)! We want to consider how recording this conversation contributed toward John's state goal of persuading Jewish unbelievers to believe in Jesus.

3:1-8

*****What did Jesus say that caused Nicodemus to marvel (3:1-8)?** Jesus told him that he must be born again in order to see/enter the kingdom of God (**3:3, 7**). God's kingdom was already around them, at that very moment, but only those who were born again could perceive it:

ESV **Luke 17:20-21** "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

¹ The Greek here could be taken to mean that John wrote so that those who already believe will keep on believing. It could also be taken to mean that John wrote so that unbelievers would be convinced to start believing. By way of contrast, John's purpose statement in another of his books is not ambiguous at all: ESV 1 John 5:13 "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." John very clearly communicated that he wrote the epistle of 1 John for *believers*. Since that's how he put it when he was writing for believers, I prefer to take the more ambiguous purpose statement in his Gospel to mean that it was written for unbelievers. John explained why a person should become a Christian, how to become a Christian, and what it means to be a Christian (Carson, 90-92).

² Carson, *John*, 91.

Why would this have been a shock to Nicodemus? He probably assumed that simply being Jewish was enough to get him into the kingdom, and especially so since he was a high official in Judaism. The only citizens of the kingdom are those who are born again (and not automatically those who are simply descendants of Abraham).

- **“Pharisees” (3:1):** Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a sect of Jewish laymen who were extremely zealous about keeping the Law of Moses. Paul, for example, had been a Pharisee before his conversion. Jesus criticized some of them for their hypocrisy:

ESV **Matthew 23:23** Woe to you ... Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.

In addition to being a Pharisee, Nicodemus was also a ruler of the Jews (3:1). That’s different from being a Pharisee. In what sense was he a ruler? This means he was a member of the Jewish religious governing body known as the Sanhedrin.³ He was an important man in Judaism.

Why do you think John bothered to inform his readers that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (3:2)? It might imply that he didn’t want to be seen. Jesus was not popular with the ruling elite, and yet Nicodemus seemed to be truly interested in what Jesus had to say.

Based on 3:2, what did Nicodemus believe about Jesus? That Jesus was a **1)** rabbi, **2)** a teacher from God, and **3)** that God was with Him.

Based on what he said in 3:2, what convinced Nicodemus that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God? The signs Jesus did convinced Nicodemus. That Nicodemus came at night suggests his statement was sincere and not an insincere statement intended to set up an entrapment. Later, Nicodemus defended Jesus to the Sanhedrin (**Jn 7:50-51**), and contributed costly spices for Jesus to have a proper burial (**Jn 19:39**).

- **“we” (3:2):** Besides Nicodemus, there evidently were other members among the Pharisees or the Sanhedrin who agreed with Nicodemus. Acts records that Pharisees were among those who believed in Jesus after Pentecost.

What Jesus said in 3:3 seems to come out of the blue. How was Jesus’ statement in 3:3 in any way a logical response to Nicodemus’ complement (3:2)? Nicodemus declared his belief that Jesus was a teacher from God (**3:2**), so perhaps Jesus answered by telling Nicodemus the only way a person could go to God (**3:3**).

What frustration did Nicodemus express in 3:4? He was thinking of the impossibility of a second physical birth.

³ Dennis, *ESV Study*, 2024.

How did Jesus explain the second birth in 3:5-6? He said the second birth is a spiritual birth. This much is clear: A person can neither “see” (3:3) nor “enter” (3:5) the kingdom without being born again. The word flesh (3:6) replaces water in 3:5, and Nicodemus had already been thinking about a physical birth (3:4). Perhaps the water refers to one’s physical birth. If so, the first birth is a natural, physical birth, and the second birth is a supernatural, spiritual birth.

- **“Spirit” (3:5, 6):** From *pneuma* (pneumatic, pneumonia); “wind, breath, things which are commonly perceived as having no material substance; by extension: spirit ... the immaterial part of the inner person that can respond to God; spirit being: (evil) spirit, ghost, God the Holy Spirit.”⁴ Since the word is capitalized in the ESV, the translators felt Jesus’ reference was to the Holy Spirit.

Based on what Jesus said in 3:7, what reaction was Nicodemus experiencing? He was marveling (which means to be filled with wonder or astonishment).⁵ Jesus’ declaration really hit him like a bolt of lightning from out of the blue—it was totally unexpected.

Review: *Why would Jesus telling Nicodemus that he had to be born again cause him to marvel (3:7)?* First, Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews; he never imagined that he was lacking in anything. Second, Jesus was being a little cryptic. Nicodemus initially thought Jesus was talking about a second physical birth.

Back in 3:4, Nicodemus asked about being born again. If someone asked you how to be born again, what would you say? Many would say that a person has to believe in Jesus to be born again. However, that’s not what Jesus said (at least not at first).

In 3:8, what did Jesus tell Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit? He said that in some sense being born of the Spirit is comparable to characteristics of wind that **1)** blows where it wishes (we have no control over it), **2)** that we hear (but can’t see), and **3)** we don’t know where it comes from or where it goes.

Play on Words: The word wind and the word Spirit are the same in the Greek (*pneuma*). In short, Jesus could have meant that being born of the Spirit, like the blowing of the wind, is something over which we have no control. Earlier, John wrote:

ESV **John 1:11-13** ... all ... who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born [past tense], not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Cause & Effect: Were you born again because you believed, or do did believe because you were born again? How you answer says a lot about your understanding of how deeply sin has impacted us:

⁴ Bill Mounce, *pneuma*, billmounce.com/Greek-dictionary. Accessed November 06, 2023.

⁵ *thaumazo*

ESV **1 Corinthians 2:14** The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them ...

ESV **Romans 8:7-8** ... the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

NIV **John 10:26** ... you do not believe because you are not my sheep.

English Baptist Pastor John Gill: "Spirit of God is a free agent in regeneration; he works how, and where, and when he pleases; he acts freely in the first operation of his grace on the heart, and in all after influences of it ... and this grace of the Spirit in regeneration, like the wind, is powerful and irresistible; it carries all before it; there is no withstanding it; it throws down Satan's strong holds, demolishes the fortifications of sin; the whole posse of hell, and the corruptions of a man's heart, are not a match for it ..."6

3:9-14

******Which people have eternal life (3:9-14)?** Whoever believes in the Son of Man has eternal life. Believing is, arguably, the result of first being born again.

What confusion was Nicodemus expressing in 3:9? He just didn't get it. Evidently his ideas about how to enter the kingdom of God were not the same as Jesus'.

Joke: Why does one Jew always answer another Jew with a question? Why not! Jesus answered Nicodemus' question (3:9) with a question (3:10). What statement was Jesus making in his question (3:10)? It was a subtle rebuke; Nicodemus should have understood what He meant. The essence of the things spoke of were there all along in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is more to a right relationship to God than ethnicity and law keeping. Going all the way back to Abraham, being right with God was always a matter of faith, not ethnic background or keeping the law of Moses:

ESV **Genesis 15:6** [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

What fundamental problem did Jesus point out in 3:11? The testimony of Jesus was not received.

ESV **John 3:32** [Jesus] bears witness ... yet no one receives his testimony.

In 3:11, who is the "we"? Perhaps this is a reference to Jesus and John the Baptist and/or the Holy Spirit:

ESV **John 1:6-7** There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

⁶ John Gill, "John 3:8", BibleStudyTools.com/Commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible, accessed November 6, 2023.

ESV **John 1:32-34** And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have bore witness that this is the Son of God."

Confusing: Back in 3:2, Nicodemus stated that he believed Jesus (re-read); yet here in 3:11 Jesus seems to state that Nicodemus did not receive what Jesus taught (read). Which is it?

a) Perhaps Nicodemus' belief in Jesus was not complete:

ESV **John 2:23-25** ... many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

b) The second occurrence of the word "you" in **3:11** is plural, as is every occurrence in **3:12**. The plural "you" may refer to the Sanhedrin, of which Nicodemus was a member. Even though Nicodemus was persuaded that Jesus was a "teacher come from God" (**3:2**), the Sanhedrin certainly was not.

ESV **John 1:11** He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

What is the answer to the question in 3:12? Obviously, the heavenly things would not be believed.

- **"earthly things" (3:12):** Jesus had used analogies in speaking of physical birth, water, and wind. The problem with this explanation is that everyone believes in physical births, water, and wind. Thus, perhaps earthly things refer to the second birth (which occurs here on earth), and heavenly things refers to the coming kingdom.

Based on 3:13, what qualified Jesus to teach on heavenly things? Jesus statement in a little confusing, but the idea is that He had descended from heaven!⁷ As Nicodemus had said earlier, "you are a teacher come from God" (3:2).

ESV **John 1:1,14** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ...

Jesus referred to Himself as the "Son of Man" (3:13). What is the Old Testament significance of that title? It was well-known in first-century Judaism to be an Old Testament reference to the Messiah:

⁷ Carson opined the idea is that no one who had ascended into heaven had come back to tell about it. Only Jesus, who was in heaven to begin with, descended to talk about it, *John*, 200.

ESV **Daniel 7:13-14** I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man ... to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Why did Moses lift up the serpent in the wilderness (3:14)? God sent judgment on the ancient Israelites in the form of poisonous snakes during their wilderness wanderings. The remedy was for Moses to hold up a bronze model of a serpent at the top of a pole; whoever looked to it could be cured.

How does what Moses did with the serpent parallel what happened with Jesus (3:14-15)? Just as Moses lifted the serpent up for physical healing, so too Jesus was lifted up on the cross for spiritual healing. Additionally, Jesus was lifted up (resurrected) from the grave.

ESV **John 6:40** ... this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life ...

Based on 3:15, what is the answer to Nicodemus' question of 3:9?

3:16-21

******Why do wicked people hate the light (3:16-21)?** It is because their works are evil, and they do not want their works exposed (3:19-20). Speaking to the religious leaders of Judaism, Jesus said:

ESV **John 8:44-45, 47** You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He ... has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.... Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.

According to 3:16-17, how did God show His love for the world? He sent His only Son so that those who believe should have eternal life. The Greek "so" (*houtos*) indicates not only how much God loved the world, but also the way in which God loved the world.

What likely options are there for what Jesus meant by "world" (3:16)? It refers to the world of people. Some say Jesus meant everyone without exception (every person, every individual, including Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and your evil aunt). Others say he meant everyone without distinction (both Jews and Gentiles); for example, note the contrast between the world and Jesus' own people (the Jews):

ESV **John 1:10-11** He was in the world ... yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Every believer is a son of God. What sense is Jesus the “only” Son (3:16)? The Greek is *monogenés*, and means unique or one of a kind.⁸ All believers are sons of God, but Jesus is the Son of God, the one and only Messiah. For example, Father Abraham had many sons (among whom was Ishmael), but Isaac is declared in **Hebrew 11:17** to be his “only” son (i.e., Abraham’s only son of promise).

Based on 3:18, why was it not necessary for Jesus to condemn the world (3:17)? Whoever does not believe stands already condemned!

ESV **John 3:36** Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

What does it mean to believe in the “name” of the only Son of God (3:18)? What’s in a name? In Scripture, someone’s “name” represents everything about a person. In this case, it means to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, God in human form, who He died on the cross for sin, and rose bodily from the grave.

According to 3:18, those who don’t believe are condemned already. According to 3:19, what is this judgment based on? It is based on the fact that people love the darkness rather than the light and refuse to come to the light.

What does the light (3:19-20) represent? Jesus is the light, sent from God the Father:

ESV **John 1:4-10** In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness.... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”

ESV **John 8:12** I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

ESV **John 9:5** ... I am the light of the world.”

ESV **John 12:46** I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

According to 3:21, what type of people come to the light? Those who do what is true come to the light.

Look carefully at 3:21. What is the source or sphere of their good works? God is ultimately behind their good actions.

NIV **John 3:21** ... 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.

⁸ Dennis, *ESV Study*, 2020.

So What?

Application: *You must be born **again!*** Man's existence is unending. You will exist somewhere forever, either in heaven or in hell. If you are only born once (physically), you'll die twice (physically and spiritually). If you are born twice, you'll only die once (physically).

ESV **Revelation 21:8** ... as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

ESV **John 11:25b** I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"

How does this interview with Nicodemus help further John's purpose in writing?

- 1) Nicodemus, a religious ruler, was one ruler who did have a favorable impression of Jesus, yet even he did not understand the things Jesus taught. The good news is that Nicodemus evidently did come to fully believe in Jesus, defending him before the Sanhedrin (**7:45-52**) and helping with his burial (**19:38-42**).
- 2) The reason the overall leadership of Judea refused to accept Jesus is because their own deeds were evil, and they refused to come to the light lest their wicked deeds be exposed. There were biased judges.
- 3) To see the kingdom of God, one must be born again which like the wind, is arguably something beyond our control, a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that results in faith in Jesus. Ultimately, the majority of Jews reject Jesus because only a remnant were predestined to be saved:

ESV **Romans 11:1, 5** ... has God rejected his people? By no means! ... there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

ESV **Romans 11:7-8** ... Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."

- 4) God's plan all along had been to offer eternal life to the whole world, not automatically just the physical descendants of Abraham.
- 5) It was the Father's plan that the Son be lifted up (crucified), even as the serpent had been, to give eternal life to whoever believes. Moses and the serpent was a type of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' death was not a failure, it was a success.