

How to Enter the Kingdom of God John 2:23–3:15

Studies in John #6

THE born again experience. Hardly anything describes American evangelicalism more than this phrase. Political candidates unashamedly grovel for votes using these magic words. Football games end with all the born again players praying at the 50-yard line. Even our culture uses this phrase, for example, to describe an actor who came out of nowhere and get back into the biz. The biblical idea has been lost under a mountain of frivolous uses.

Here in John 3 we encounter this phrase. But it has to be understood in its context; that's why the end of chapter 2 is so important to understanding. It also has to be understood in the overall purpose of the book: John records some of Jesus' signs that revealed his glory and some of his conversations such as with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the Gentile official, and the man at the pool of Bethesda that explain who he is. And here with Nicodemus what we hear is Jesus' teaching on HOW TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

THE PROBLEM OF ENTERING ON OUR TERMS (2:23–3:2)

You can't understand chapter 3 unless you link it to the end of chapter 2 and THE PROBLEM OF ENTERING ON OUR OWN TERMS. Jesus **was still in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast** where he has just cleansed the temple. **Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing** (v. 23). This

connects back to Jesus' turning water into wine when "his disciples *believed in him*" (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν; 2:11). We've seen polar opposites: belief by his disciples and unbelief by the Judean leaders at the temple who asked him to do a sign authenticating his being the Messiah. Here we're told **many believed in his name** (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ). Hallelujah! Not. So. Fast. Look at verse 24. The Greek is more striking than the ESV: ***He, though, Jesus, did not entrust himself to them.*** Many trusted Jesus; but Jesus didn't entrust himself to them! The same word that is used of their faith in him is used of his not having faith in them. This should wake us up in the morning! It's possible to have what looks like faith because of a miracle God has done. But it's not true faith. How many people have we met who have gone forward at an altar call at a Harvest Crusade or Billy Graham Crusade? How many people do we know who were lonely and were told Jesus would be the best friend ever; they believed, the void was filled, only to have something happen and they lost faith? How many people have been told, "God has a wonderful plan for your life," they trusted Jesus, something great happened, then something bad happened only to see them fall away? If that's you today I say to you with all seriousness because I care for you: *You can deceive people; you cannot deceive Jesus!* True faith is giving yourself to Jesus for who he is, not for what he gives you.

Here's another surprising and unsettling aspect of Jesus you don't hear about in the Churchianity so popular today! Why wouldn't Jesus entrust himself to people? **Because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man** (ἄνθρώπου), **for he himself knew what was in man** (ἄνθρωπῳ; vv. 24–25). The Jewish commentary tradition in Jesus' day said "seven things are hidden from man" like "the day of death" and "the time of restoration of the kingdom of David." Also on the list was "what is within another."¹ In contrast, the Jeremiah said, "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind" (Jer. 17:10). Jesus knows what only God knows: the heart.

What word did you just hear twice in verse 25? Look at how chapter 3 begins with a connection: **now**² or **and there was a man** (ἄνθρωπος; v. 1). One such **man** whose heart Jesus knew was **named Nicodemus**.³ He was **of the Pharisees**, those strict observers especially of the traditions of the elders, and he was **a ruler**, being part of the Sanhedrin or Jewish ruling Council.⁴ He's no ordinary person; he's a religious leader with the highest clearance level!

This man came to Jesus by night (v. 2) because he wanted to be incognito. More so, night is a double entendre—a word with two connotations. Yes it's dark at **night** but in this Gospel the connotation is spiritual darkness (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30). Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the

dark not knowing he's still in the dark! He says seemingly so respectfully, **“Rabbi, we know,”** and he speaks seemingly so impressively of their “faith”: **“we know that you are a teacher come from God”** (v. 2). What's wrong? When the delegation of Pharisees went to John in chapter 1 they at least considered he was: the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet like Moses! Nicodemus' respect on behalf of his group denigrates Jesus as merely a teacher! Get ready for the Nicodemus spirit on tv this Easter season as religious scholars all unite to deny the resurrection only to say quickly, But he's one of the world's great teachers.” Nicodemus knows this about Jesus **“for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him”** (v. 2). Did you catch that? Nicodemus is a **man** like those Jesus knows and didn't entrust himself to; and he's just like them in believing because of his signs. **“No one can do these signs that you do”** (τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς) alludes back to 2:23 and those who believed because of **the signs that he was doing** (τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει). “Houston, we have a problem!” Nicodemus illustrates for you and me the problem of trying to enter God's kingdom on your own terms: He wants Jesus for what he can get from his miracles. He wants Jesus as a great teacher but still trusts observing what his tradition has taught him is his ticket to heaven. This selfish self-trust is *our* problem!

THE PROCLAMATION OF ENTERING ON GOD’S TERMS (3:3–15)

In contrast, in Jesus’ words we hear THE PROCLAMATION OF ENTERING ON GOD’S TERMS. Children, Jesus says is that you and I must be completely changed by God to enter God’s kingdom. Look at verse 3 and following.

You must be born anew from above (v. 3). Like back in 1:51 Jesus **answered** Nicodemus in a solemn statement: “**Truly, truly** or *Amen, Amen.*” In the collective human wisdom of some Pharisees Nicodemus said “**we know;**” the Word-made-flesh says, “**I say to you.**” His proclamation of the solution to the problem is “**unless one is born again** (γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν) **he cannot see the kingdom of God**” (v. 3). Jesus’ evangelistic methodology here is to cut right to the heart of the matter. Next time you’re talking with someone put them off guard with the bottom line truth right at the beginning; then listen and answer their questions and objections! “So you say you can see that God is with me in my signs, huh? You can’t **see** the fullness of the kingdom I’ve brought unless you’re changed!” The coming **kingdom** is the hope of the Old Testament, isn’t it? We hear the Law and the Prophets’ put to song in the refrains of the Psalms: “the LORD is king,” “the LORD reigns over all,” and “the LORD’s kingdom extends from shore to shore.” They longed for the coming **kingdom** to put an end to the world’s wicked kingdoms. In Jesus’ day the kingdom age was understood to be the age of resurrection life when every Israelite except

serious apostates would be raised from the dead.⁵ What does Jesus say? Even the Nicodemus' who belong the covenant people, are a cut above as Pharisees, and the elite of the elite in the Sanhedrin, must be radically changed to enter!

This is impossible! (v. 4) **Nicodemus** is incredulous: “**How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?**” (v. 4) Have you ever had that experience when you’re talking with someone and they’re hearing you, but they’re not listening? Nicodemus hears Jesus talking about being **born again**. That’s impossible if you’re thinking merely physiologically. I mean, not even all the plastic surgery, dieting, exercise, make-up, and day spas are able to transform you into a new you—just a younger *looking* you on the outside! If that was all Jesus were saying, then he’d be right. But **born again** is double entendre because every other time John uses that word **again** in his Gospel it means **above**.⁶

You must be born of spirit (vv. 5–8). That’s what **Jesus** goes on to explain in more detail: “**Truly, truly or Amen, Amen, I say to you (all), unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God**” (v. 5). See in verse 3 is paralleled with **enter** here. **Born again** or *from above* in verse 3 is paralleled with **born of water and the Spirit**.⁷ What Nicodemus said was impossible physiologically is possible for God. In fact, it was promised by God

in the prophets who said this would happen in the age of the Messiah. Write down Ezekiel 36 and read it this afternoon in comparison with John 3. To summarize, the prophet speaks to the exiled people of God in Babylon who once defiled the land by their idolatry like a woman was impure during her menstruation (v. 17). Because of that the nations defiled his name in mockery (vv. 20–21). But the Lord would act for the sake of his holy name! (vv. 22–23) How? By returning them to the Promised Land (v. 24) with this promise: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean...I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you...I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (vv. 25, 26, 27). Impossible with you, yes; but with me, I’ve promised to do this! **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”** In 1:13 John said God’s children are born “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” **“That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”** (v. 6). There’s earthly life, and that’s all Nicodemus and we are capable of hearing as sinners; but there’s also heavenly life that we need and that only God can give. It’s not about being born as a Jew that gives entrance into the kingdom, but being born anew. Jesus says, **“Do not marvel at this because as the wind blows where it wishes...so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”** (vv. 7–8). **Of the Spirit.** That phrase is used twice here (vv. 6, 8). It means the Holy Spirit, not you and me, is the one who gives

this new spiritual life. It also means he's the one who acts while we are acted upon. John uses passive voice here to say the action is performed *on* us, not *by* us. We don't sprinkle ourselves, we don't put the Spirit in ourselves, we don't give ourselves a heart transplant—this is *given to* us! This is the beauty of why the gospel is good news: it's something *God* does for us when we can't do it for ourselves! Amen? Oh, and I should mention what comes after Ezekiel 36? Ezekiel 37, of course! But what does that say? Israel was like a valley of dead, dry bones and when the Spirit blew over them like the wind they came alive!⁸

How is this possible? (v. 9) Nicodemus is still confused and incredulous:

“How can these things be?” which is better **“How can *this* happen?”**⁹

You must believe in the Son from above (vv. 10–15). Jesus answer[s] him tongue in cheek, **“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”** (v. 10) Nicodemus came to Jesus flaunting his PhD but should have known his elementary school education and the prophets like Ezekiel. Nicodemus self-confidently says “we” this and “we” that; Jesus sarcastically says, **“Truly, truly or *Amen, Amen*, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and *we* bear witness to what we have seen, but you *all* do not receive our testimony”** (v. 11). You're the teacher but **“if I have told you**

earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (v. 12)

Jesus can speak like this because of who he is. The connection to verse 13 is not clear because the ESV omits *and*. “**And no one has ascended into heaven except,**” meaning, *but only*,¹⁰ “**he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man**” (v. 13). The Pharisees’ tradition was that holy men went up to heaven to get messages from God only to come back down. But Jesus says he’s more than **a teacher come from God** (v. 2). He didn’t ascend then descend like ancient holy men; heaven was his home where he eternally existed in the bosom and love of the Father and now has come down to make him known to us (1:18).¹¹ He’ll ascend back there: “**as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up**” (v. 14). The bronze serpent elevated on a pole was the means the Lord gave Israel back physical life if they would look to it (Num. 21:4–9). And that’s the connection between Jesus and us: “**that whoever believes in him may have eternal life**” (v. 15).

The story began with false faith because of miracles; it ends with Jesus’ call to Nicodemus to truly trust and receive new spiritual life that alone is the way to enter the kingdom of God. That kingdom is not a far off hope; it’s a present reality as that life of the age to come is found **in him** today.

Endnotes

Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, Volume 4, Part 1: St. John (Oxford, John Henry Parker; London, J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1845), .

Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, IVa, John 1–10, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), .

J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 1–6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 3:107–108.

Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), .

¹ Cited in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 184.

² On the interpretation of $\delta\epsilon$ see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 185–186.

³ On the connection between 2:23–25 and 3:1, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 121–123.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 210.

⁵ See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 189.

⁶ E.g., 3:31; 19:11, 23.

⁷ On the interpretative options, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 191–196; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 215–218.

⁸ See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 198.

⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 198.

¹⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 200.

¹¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 200–201.