

**The Gospel of John (15);
“Jesus, Nicodemus, and the New Birth” (part 3) (3:8-12)**

Introduction:

Let us open God’s Word once again to the third chapter of John’s Gospel. This is the third Lord’s Day on which we are examining this passage. Today we will read a little further into our passage than we have previously. But in order to provide context, we will begin again with verse 1 and read through verse 15.¹

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

³Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

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

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

We have been working through this third chapter of John in which we read of our Lord Jesus engaging this prominent Jewish leader regarding his need for the new birth. Although Nicodemus was perhaps at the top of his profession and one of the foremost Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem, a very highly placed and highly regarded man of God, Jesus told him that unless he was born again, he would not enter the kingdom of God.

I was reading this week from an older expositor of the Gospels, **Alfred Edersheim**, in his classic work, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. His knowledge of Jewish life and ways in the first century lends a dimension to his work, that sets it apart as rather unique. He can be speculative, and he was so in establishing the setting for this encounter of Nicodemus with our Lord Jesus. Edersheim speculated that John the Apostle, who wrote this Gospel, lived in Jerusalem. John, after all, was well-connected with the

¹ This passage from the New King James Version (NKJV) is set forth in 6 paragraphs. The last paragraph begins with v. 10 and continues through v. 17. The English Standard Version (ESV) divides this passage into two paragraphs, vs 1-8 and vs. 9-15. One reason for the NKJV having more paragraphs is due to the practice of separating the speech of characters in separate paragraphs, a practice I favor. We have stopped our reading with verse 15, however, even though the paragraph continues in the NKJV through v. 17. Not only does the ESV conclude the paragraph with verse 15, but the editors of the modern Greek NT conclude its paragraph with verse 15. Actually the editors of the Greek NT have all the verses from verse 1 through verse 15 in a single paragraph. See Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, eds, et al, **The Greek New Testament**, 3rd edition (United Bible Societies, 1966, 1968, 1975), pp. 328f.

high priest and the Jewish hierarchy (cf. John 18:15f). John may have had a house in Jerusalem, which would have had a flat roof which served as an outdoor patio that could be reached by outside stairs. And so, granted his speculation, Edersheim described the scene:

If from John 19:27 we might infer that St. John had ‘a home’ in Jerusalem itself—which, considering the simplicity of living at the time, and the cost of houses, would not necessarily imply that he was rich—the scene about to be described would have taken place under the roof of him who has given us its record. In any case, the circumstances of life at the time are so well known, that we have no difficulty in realizing the surroundings. It was night—one of the nights in that Easter week so full of marvels. Perhaps we may be allowed to suppose that, as so often in analogous circumstances, the spring-wind, sweeping up the narrow streets of the City, had suggested the comparison, which was so full of deepest teaching to Nicodemus. Up in the simply furnished *Aliyah*—the guest-chamber on the roof—the lamp was still burning, and the Heavenly Guest still busy with thought and words. There was no need for Nicodemus to pass through the house, for an outside stair led to the upper room. It was night, when Jewish superstition would keep men at home; a wild, gusty spring night, when loiterers would not be in the streets; and no one would see him as at that hour he ascended the outside steps that led up to the *Aliyah*. His errand was soon told: one sentence, that which admitted the Divine teachership of Jesus, implied all that questions he wished to ask. Nay, his very presence there spoke them. Or, if otherwise, the answer of Jesus spoke them. Throughout, Jesus never descended to the standpoint of Nicodemus, but rather sought to lift him to His own. It was all about ‘the Kingdom of God,’ so connected with that Teacher come from God, that Nicodemus would inquire.²

I had always thought of this meeting having taken place in the environs of the Mount of Olives. We know that our Lord and His disciples used to frequent there (Cf. Luke 22:39). But my assumption has no more warrant than Edersheim’s, and perhaps less.

Last week we addressed in a measure verses 3 through 6. Our Lord’s initial pronouncement in verse 3 must have been quite startling and unsettling to Nicodemus. Jesus said to him, “Very, Verily, I say unto you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3).

Nicodemus responded with a question he posed to Jesus. He said to Jesus, “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). Some believe Nicodemus to have been honestly inquisitive by asking this question. But it seems to connote more than a man simply wanting to be instructed. It would appear that the response of Jesus must have struck a nerve. Nicodemus asked a rhetorical question, which seems to suggest that our Lord’s statement was illegitimate, or at least inappropriate. Clearly Nicodemus was ignorant and wanted answers, but he may have also been incredulous, after the Lord gave him an “answer” that seemed to penetrate his soul and confront his entire world view, to discredit as illegitimate and immaterial all that he was and all that he had achieved.

Nicodemus was like those the apostle Paul described, he had “a zeal for God” (cf. Rom. 10:2). But in spite of his education, his experience, and his service to God, his zeal was “not according to knowledge.” He had thought that his salvation, that is, his entrance and participation in the promised kingdom of God, would be granted to him because he had ordered his life in righteousness. He thought that this entitled him entrance and participation in the resurrection onto eternal life. But the Lord Jesus instructed him otherwise. This man would only be granted entrance into the kingdom of God, if God performed a sovereign work of grace in his soul, in which the Holy Spirit caused him to be born again, or born from above. Nicodemus would have understood that Jesus had just placed him on the same standing as Gentiles who would convert to Judaism. Nicodemus, too, just as they, needed a new birth that would result in him being both cleansed from his sin and spiritual life imparted to him. He was in need of being born of water and spirit, as Jesus declared to him in verse 5.

² Alfred Edersheim, **The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah**, 3rd edition, vol. 1 (E. R. Herrick & Company, 1886), p. 383.

Nicodemus was taken to school by Jesus, and taught the first lesson in the school of Christ: salvation is by God's grace, not by man's natural birth into a Jewish family or achievement within a prescribed religious system, as good and righteous as that system was. And Nicodemus had been ignorant of this, until our Savior stated the matter clearly and forthrightly to him.

J. C. Ryle wrote that the crass spiritual ignorance of Nicodemus was common place in the churches of his day at the end of the 19th century:

Ignorance like that of Nicodemus is unhappily far too common in the Church of Christ. We must never be surprised if we find it in quarters where we might reasonably expect knowledge. Learning, and rank, and high ecclesiastical office are no proof that a minister is taught by the Spirit. The successors of Nicodemus, in every age, are far more numerous than the successors of St. Peter. On no point is religious ignorance so common as on the work of the Holy Ghost. That old stumbling-block, at which Nicodemus stumbled, is as much an offence to thousands in the present day as it was in the days of Christ. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:14). Happy is he who has been taught to prove all things by Scripture, and to call no man master upon earth (1 Thess. 5:21; Matt. 23:9).³

Nicodemus was in need of a work of grace in his soul, a transformative work in which he would become a new man. It would result in him understanding he had no merit, nothing to commend him unto God. That God must extend to him His grace or else he will perish in his sin.

Arthur Pink wrote a book on regeneration, or the new birth. He addressed this two-fold need of the forgiveness of sin by God and the receiving of new life from God.

Two chief obstacles lie in the way of the salvation of any of Adam's fallen descendants: bondage to the guilt and penalty of sin, bondage to the power and presence of sin; or, in other words, their being bound for Hell and their being unfit for Heaven. These obstacles are, so far as man is concerned, entirely insurmountable... A lost sinner might more easily create a world than save his own soul.

He went on to write of these two works:

As intimated above, two things are absolutely essential in order to salvation: deliverance from the guilt and penalty of sin, deliverance from the power and presence of sin. The one is secured by the mediatorial work of Christ, the other is accomplished by the effectual operations of the Holy Spirit. The one is the blessed result of what the Lord Jesus *did* for God's people; the other is the glorious consequence of what the Holy Spirit *does* in God's people.

In response to the question posed by Nicodemus, our Lord responded to him in **verses 6 and 7**,

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

We explained last week that we should avoid limiting Jesus' use of "flesh" by uncritically importing Paul's common use of the term "flesh" to speak of the sinful nature with which each of us was born. Certainly the sinfulness of our nature is included here in our Lord's words, but He was saying more when He voiced those words, "That which is born of flesh is flesh." As one wrote,

This further statement by Jesus serves to reinforce the radical nature of the cleansing and renewal from God. The concept of flesh is not to be simplistically imported from the apostle Paul, for in John "flesh" is merely the body and its limitations, which is sharply contrasted to the source of the children of God,

³ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 142.

which is supernatural and entirely from the outside of a person (cf. 1:12-13). The point is quite simple: “flesh” and “spirit” are different spheres of reality. Each producing offspring like itself.⁴

In other words, in verse 6 “that which is born of flesh is flesh” is describing more broadly our limitation as finite, yes, sinful, but principally finite creatures of this world. And as such, we are incapable through natural birth to enter into the kingdom of God which is characterized by another kind of existence in the presence of an infinite God. And so, the Lord Jesus [who Himself had become “flesh” (1:14), but not sinful flesh] told Nicodemus that because he was but a human being, and that he was a sinful human being, he was unable to enter the kingdom of God to dwell in God’s presence with His people. And so, yes he was in need of cleansing from sin, but he needed much more, he needed new life imparted to him from above. He was in need of a new kind of life. He was in need of a spiritual dimension or existence imparted to him that would enable him to experience and enjoy the life of God with His people. Even if Nicodemus could enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born again physically, he would yet remain unfit for the kingdom. More is needed than a physical birth, only that born of the Spirit can enter the kingdom of God.

Matthew Henry addressed both causes of our limitation to dwell with God in his comments on John 3:6. He wrote,

The *necessity* of this change. *First*, Christ here shows that it is necessary in the *nature of the thing*, for we are not fit to enter into the kingdom of God till we are born again: *That which is born of the flesh if flesh* (v. 6). Here is our malady, with the causes of it, which are such that it is plain there is no remedy but we must be *born again*.

1. We are here told *what we are*: We are *flesh*, not only *corporeal* but *corrupt* (Gen. 6:3). The soul is still a spiritual substance, but so wedded to the flesh, so captivated by the will of the flesh, so in love with the delights of the flesh, so employed in making provision for the flesh, that it is mostly called *flesh*; it is carnal. And what communion can there be between God, who is a *spirit*, and a soul in this condition?

2. How we *came to be so*; by being *born of the flesh*. It is a corruption that is bred *in the bone* with us, and therefore we cannot have a new nature, but we must be *born again*. The corrupt nature, which is *flesh*, takes rise from our *first birth*; and therefore the new nature, which is *spirit*, must take rise from a second birth. Nicodemus spoke of entering again into his mother’s womb, and being born; but, if he could do so, to what purpose? If he were born of his mother a hundred times, that would not mend the matter, for still that *which is born of the flesh if flesh*; a clean thing cannot be brought out of an unclean. He must seek for another original, must be born of the Spirit, or he cannot become spiritual. The case is, in short, this: though man is made to consist of body and soul, yet his spiritual part had then so much the dominion over his corporeal part that he was denominated a *living soul* (Gen. 2:7), but by indulging the appetite of the flesh, in eating forbidden fruit, he prostituted the just dominion of the soul to the tyranny of sensual lust, and became no longer a *living soul*, but flesh: *Dust thou art*.⁵

Is it any wonder that Jesus would say in **verse 7** to Nicodemus, “***Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’***”?

By the way, there is something in one of the Greek pronouns of this verse that is not conveyed in our English translations. Pronouns can be either singular or plural. And so in English, the first person singular pronoun is “I.” The first person plural pronoun is “we.” The third person singular pronoun is either “he”, “she” or “it.” The third person plural pronoun is “they.” In English, however, the second person singular and plural pronouns are spelled the same way: “you.” In English the context determines if a single “you” is being addressed or if two or more are being addressed as “you.” But in Greek the second person singular and

⁴ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 199.

⁵ Matthew Henry, **Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible**, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 884.

plural pronouns are spelled differently [singular: σοι (*soy*); plural: ὑμεῖς (*humas*)]. In verses 3 and 5 Jesus said to Nicodemus “You (singular) must be born again.” But in verse 7, when Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Do not marvel that I said to you (sing.), ‘**You** (plural) must be born again.’” Here Jesus used the *plural* second person pronoun, not the singular. The Lord Jesus spoke of all humanity as “you”, not just Nicodemus as an individual.

By natural birth people become members of an earthly family; to become members of the family of God, to receive the spiritual nature which alone can gain admittance to his kingdom, a birth ‘from above’ is necessary.⁶

All human beings are in need of being born again, and we should not marvel that this is so. You need to be born again or you will most certainly never see or enter the Kingdom of God. And you need more than forgiveness of sin, although that is also essential. You need new life. And sadly there are many like Nicodemus walking about in our churches who believe themselves forgiven of their sins, but they are void of the new life, the spiritual life that is also essential. And if that life is not present, then neither is the forgiveness of sins.

Our Lord made it clear to Nicodemus that he was powerless to effect this change or even to qualify himself to receive this blessing from God. The new birth is the sovereign work of God in which He alone chooses to work in those He has chosen to save. **Verse 8** makes this clear. Jesus said,

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

John 3:8 is one of the clearest of biblical statements of the sovereignty of God in the dispensing of His grace to bring salvation. Actually, the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit is set forth. The “wind” is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for “wind” and “breath” (Τὸ πνεῦμα, *to pneuma*), is the same Greek word for the Holy “Spirit” (Τὸ πνεῦμα, *to pneuma*). [And in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for “wind” or “breath” is רוּחַ (*ruach*), and the Hebrew word for “spirit” is also רוּחַ (*ruach*).] Clearly the Lord Jesus was teaching that the Holy Spirit is sovereign in whom He creates spiritual life, even the breath of eternal life. “The hidden work of the Spirit in the human heart cannot be controlled or seen, but its effects are unmistakably evident.”⁷ Just as God had first breathed physical life into Adam when he had been fashioned as a body but still void of his spirit, so God must breathe spiritual life into all of the offspring of Adam, who exist without the Holy Spirit (cf. Gen. 2:7).

Just as the wind does what it wants to do when it wants to do it, so does the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in His operations. Here are one commentator’s comments:

The effective, though invisible, operation of the Spirit ought not to cause men surprise, since the privy, imperceptible working of the wind testifies to the reality and power of what is beyond human sight (Ecc. 11:5, 6; cf. Job 9:11). The analogy (cf. 20:22) is all the more remarkable because the same word (in Greek and Hebrew) means both wind and spirit. The whole sentence about the wind is word for word directly applicable to the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:2-4). What those who have been born of the Spirit are, whence they come and whither they go, is incomprehensible to the world; as incomprehensible as Jesus Himself is to the Jews (8:14).⁸

This analogy of our Lord is very clever and full of meaning and implication. As another wrote:

⁶ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 85.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Edwin Clement Hoskyns, **The Fourth Gospel** (Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 215.

The meaning is found not in the point of reconciliation between differences but in the one thing that both wind and spirit have in common: the mysterious, the unseen. The further apart the two might appear only enhances what they have in common, and this is exactly what Jesus stresses. The wind cannot be controlled; it contains its own power. The wind can be heard and even recognized, but it cannot be known or analyzed. Its activities, though active in and around us, are wholly other. It is at one and the same time a part of our experience and yet totally beyond us and entirely outside of what we can know and do. “So it is” with the “spirit.” Jesus’ comparison is not between “wind” and lower case “spirit,” but he has creatively necessitated that the term refer to the upper case “Spirit.” For only *the* Spirit is able to provide the new birth. The creative use of “spirit/wind/Spirit” allows Jesus to explain forcefully the mysterious power and activity of the Spirit. Just as “life” is “in the Word” (1:4), so also are *spiritual* things empowered “by the Spirit.” The one “born of the Spirit,” therefore, is nothing less than a mysterious, supernatural creation of God (cf. 1:12-13). Just as “water and spirit” in v. 5 was echoing Ezekiel 36, so here the playful use of the term “wind/spirit/Spirit” echoes Ezekiel 37, where the dead have “breath put in them” (v. 10). This is the nature of the new birth about which Jesus speaks.⁹

Charles Spurgeon spoke of the sovereign nature of the saving work of the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is like the wind because He is absolutely sovereign. Preachers scarcely like to tell their congregations nowadays that God gives His grace according to His own good pleasure. I learned, when I was a boy, that the chief end of man was to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But I hear now, according to the new theology, that the chief end of God is to glorify man and enjoy him forever. Yet this is the turning of things upside down. The glory of God is still the chief end of the world’s existence. And whether men will have it so or not, the Lord has settled it. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” So that, “it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy.” No voice is more glad than mine to preach the free salvation of God to them that perish. But God has not sunk His sovereignty in His bounty. Jehovah still reigns and the wind blows where it wishes and not where man wills that it shall blow.¹⁰

The concept of spiritual life that God imparts to people was unintelligible to Nicodemus. He could not comprehend it, for spiritual truth must be apprehended by the Spirit. A relatively unknown commentator wrote this:

Knowledge, true theological knowledge and apprehension, capacity to see the dominion (kingdom) of God, is not secured by acquiring more and more information. Nicodemus already possessed quite sufficient information, both acquired and hereditary. The knowledge of God demands re-orientation, a new creative beginning, so ultimate and fundamental that the initial fact of birth provides the only proper analogy; the only proper analogy, in the sense that all other analogies depend upon it. But Nicodemus does not understand this; nor does he understand what a sign or parable is. By a strange paradox, the man who has come to converse about God and is sure that he knows what a divine mission is, turns out to be, in spite of his delicate perceptions, a complete materialist. He can conceive of no birth other than that which made him what he is. He has grown old in the service of God, and an old man cannot begin all over again. Indeed, is not the life he is now living as a Rabbi and Pharisee the life demanded by God? Nicodemus is a materialist, not because he takes visible human life seriously but because he does not see what it means: he does not see the human birth is itself speaking of that which lies beyond it and above it; it is speaking of the creative act of God, of birth from above. Jesus meets the expressed unbelief of Nicodemus by asserting what He had said with greater precision. It is not merely a question of knowledge, as though the Kingdom of God were a thing to be seen and known, as if it were from outside.

⁹ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 200.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 55.

The dominion of God is that under which men must live; they must enter into it: for it is their proper life. But no one belongs to the Israel of God unless he has been purified and created by the Spirit of God.¹¹

We read further of this dialogue in **verses 9 and 10**.

Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”

Even though Nicodemus reflects his ignorance, he had this realization: What he was hearing was profound and would change everything that he had ever believed, would discredit everything he had ever done, and would dismiss every motivation that ever stirred him onward in the Jews’ religion.

The Lord Jesus did not seem to make it easy for him. “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” It would appear that our Lord drew his attention to consider the high regard and position that he had attained, and he should have understood what he was being told!

These verses show us, firstly, *what gross spiritual ignorance there may be in the mind of a great and learned man*. We see “a master of Israel” unacquainted with the first elements of saving religion. Nicodemus is told about the new birth, and at once exclaims, “How can these things be?” When such was the darkness of a Jewish teacher, what must have been the state of the Jewish people? It was indeed due time for Christ to Appear! The pastors of Israel had ceased to feed the people with knowledge. The blind were leading the blind, and both were falling into the ditch (Matt. 15:14).¹²

Take note, as ignorant as Nicodemus was, he was culpable for his ignorance. Any man who dares stand before others to teach them the Word of God will not be able to plead ignorance before the Lord. The warning has been given:

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” (James 3:1, ESV)

When Jesus said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”, he was rebuking Nicodemus for his spiritual ignorance. He was culpable and accountable.

Nicodemus confesses himself baffled by all this. His puzzled question elicits the gentle reminder that a man in his position ought not to find it all so very difficult. “The teacher of Israel” points at very least to preeminence as a teacher. The article (“the” not “a” teacher) may indicate that Nicodemus held some official position, but if so we do not know what it was.¹³

Alfred Edersheim thought the issue that stymied Nicodemus was the order in which Jesus arranged the new birth and entrance into the kingdom. Nicodemus would have agreed with the notion that to enter the Kingdom would result in one entering a new life, that it would be like a new birth. But for Nicodemus, he thought that all of his life’s preparation qualified him for entrance and then he would experience the new life. Jesus told him however, he had the order all wrong. He must first be given the new life and only then would he be qualified to enter the kingdom. Edersheim wrote:

According to the Jewish view, this second birth was the *consequence* of having taken upon oneself ‘the kingdom;’ not, as Jesus put it, the *cause* and condition of it. The proselyte (i.e. Gentile convert to Judaism) had taken upon himself ‘the kingdom,’ and therefore was ‘born’ anew, while Jesus put it that he must be born again in order to see the Kingdom of God...

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 203f.

¹² J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 141f.

¹³ Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 221.

...What Nicodemus had seen of Jesus had not only shaken the confidence which his former views on these subject had engendered in him, but opened dim possibilities, the very suggestion of which filled him with uneasiness as to the past, and vague hopes as to the future.¹⁴

I cannot help but think that Nicodemus walked home that night an unsettled, even a quivering man. He had been taken to the school of Christ and learned more than what he had thought he needed to know. His whole world had been turned upside down, or at least now he was pondering whether he had been viewing wrongly these important matters all along. He must have come to see that he had so much to learn, and so much more to unlearn.

...all this sounded quite strange and unintelligible to Nicodemus. He could understand how a man might *become* other, and so ultimately *be* other; but how a man could first *be* other in order to *become* other—more than that, needed to be ‘born from above,’ in order to ‘see the Kingdom of God’—passed alike his experience and his Jewish learning... There was only one gate by which a man could pass in that Kingdom of God—for that which was of the flesh could ever be only fleshly. Here a man might strive, as did the Jews, by outward conformity to *become*, but he would never attain to *being*. But that ‘Kingdom’ was *spiritual*, and here a man must *be* in order to *become*.

Perhaps this interchange with Jesus caused him to ponder again the Hebrew Scriptures that he thought he had known so well. Had he done so and the Holy Spirit helped him in his quest, he would have found that even though he was the teacher of Israel, Jesus was right, he should have known these things. The Old Testament certainly speaks of the need and the promise of regeneration by God’s grace. Consider these few examples:

(1) **Deuteronomy 5:28ff.** When God had given His law to Israel through Moses, Moses returned to God telling Him of the people’s commitment to obey His laws. We read of Moses recounting this encounter with God.

Then the LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me: ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right *in* all that they have spoken. ²⁹*Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!*

The covenant that God had made with Israel was with the physical descendants of the Patriarchs. Entrance into that covenant community was through physical birth. But the covenant of Mount Sinai made no provision for the new birth, for the imparting and empowering of the Holy Spirit to enable them to live lives of faithful obedience to God’s laws. God’s words to Moses intimated need of the people of Israel for new hearts in order for them to dwell in the Kingdom of God, enabling them to order their lives according to His laws.

(2) **Psalms 51:10f.** King David in his confession of his great sin, requested of God to give him a new heart by the Holy Spirit.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

¹⁴ Edersheim, vol. 1, pp. 384f.

King David was probably asking the Lord to renew him rather than to make him wholly new, but again, it suggests the need for the new birth, the new heart, a new creation, in order for one to be in a blessed relationship with God.

(3) Ezekiel 18:30-32. The prophet addressed the nation of Israel at a time when it was under His wrath for having broken their covenant with Him. Here the Lord spoke through His prophet speaking of their need for a new heart and a new spirit.

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and *get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit*. For why should you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!”

Now obviously people are powerless to achieve or get a new heart, in that it must be produced by the Holy Spirit. But here God is declaring their great need. Nicodemus should have seen the need for all of his people to obtain a new heart and spirit in order to be blessed of God with His salvation.

(4) Ezekiel 36:24-28. Here God was declaring that He would cause a remnant of Jews to return to their homeland after the Babylonian Exile and there He would bring them salvation. He would do so by cleansing them of their sin and giving them the Holy Spirit, thereby enabling them to order their lives according to His laws. In other words, the Holy Spirit would enable them to enter and dwell in His promised kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. ²⁸Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.

Of Nicodemus, **J. C. Ryle** wrote,

He professed to know the Old Testament Scriptures. The doctrine, therefore, of the necessity of a new birth ought not to have appeared strange to him. “A clean heart, --circumcision of the heart, --a new heart,--a heart of stone instead of a heart of flesh,” were expressions and ideas which he must have read in the Prophets, and which all pointed towards the new birth. His ignorance consequently was deserving of blame.¹⁵

And **F. F. Bruce** wrote in the same vein, but appealing to different Old Testament accounts of which Nicodemus should have been thoroughly acquainted.

The description of Nicodemus as ‘the teacher of Israel’ implies that he had some standing among the rabbis of his day. He might therefore have been expected to comprehend Jesus’ teaching, which was not a complete innovation but was implicit in the Hebrew Scriptures – and not in the prophets only. The safe passage of Noah and his family through the flood, to start life anew in a new world (Gen. 6:13-9:19), the redeemed Israelites’ crossing of the sea of reeds to be a people set apart for God (Exo. 14:15-15:21), Naaman the Syrian’s “baptism” in Jordan, whereby ‘his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean’ (2 Kings 5:14) – these and other OT incidents were parables of the truth which Jesus was endeavoring to convey to Nicodemus. The Naaman incident in particular was regarded as a

¹⁵ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 149.

precedent for proselyte-baptism. But from none of these scriptures had Nicodemus learned the lesson that the Jews by natural descent, as well as for proselytes, the life of the age to come and participation in the kingdom of God could be attained only through the gateway of regeneration.¹⁶

Nicodemus should have known these things. The entire Old Testament record is a history of the total failure of his people to live in the kingdom of God over which God the Creator was King. The promised mediatorial kingdom of the coming Messiah would secure a people who would be willingly compliant, happily so, to the laws of God as administered by their King, the Son of David, who was the Son of God. The prophets wrote of many promises of God that the day was coming when God would restore His condemned people Israel. His salvation would be as a new exodus, a second exodus, in which He would again call them unto Himself. But this promised coming Kingdom of the Messiah would be far more glorious than anything they had ever experienced. Consider God's promise through His prophet **Micah 7:15-20**:

“As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt,
I will show them wonders.”

¹⁶The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might;
They shall put their hand over their mouth;
Their ears shall be deaf.

¹⁷They shall lick the dust like a serpent;
They shall crawl from their holes like snakes of the earth.
They shall be afraid of the LORD our God,
And shall fear because of You.

¹⁸Who is a God like You,
Pardoning iniquity
And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?

He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in mercy.

¹⁹He will again have compassion on us,
And will subdue our iniquities.

You will cast all our sins
Into the depths of the sea.

²⁰You will give truth to Jacob
And mercy to Abraham,
Which You have sworn to our fathers
From days of old.

The Lord rebuked Nicodemus, for he should have known better. Later one of our Lord's own, the apostle Peter, would stand in Jerusalem and declare, ““Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days” (Acts 3:24). And yet this man, Nicodemus was clueless.

This confirms to us the great need of the work of illumination that the Holy Spirit works in people. Unless He enables us to see, we will remain in our blind ignorance. This is why we have set a place in our bulletin every week for the need for a prayer of illumination, so that the blessed Holy Spirit would give us spiritual understanding and a sense of the critical relevance and tremendous importance of His words that we open up before us.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 86.

Nicodemus should have known. The entire record of the Hebrew Scriptures revealed that His people did not need a new place in which to live, as though a renewed paradise (e.g. the world after the flood, the Promised Land) or merely returning to their land. They needed new hearts, as well as the free and full pardon of their sins secured through the Suffering Servant. Here are the words of **Thomas Schreiner** as he was summarizing the message of the prophets.

Exile is not a permanent condition. Yahweh¹⁷ had not abandoned his people. The promise that the offspring of the woman would triumph over the serpent¹⁸ was not withdrawn. The promise made to Abraham of offspring, land, and world-wide blessing would still be fulfilled, as would the promise that a king from David's line would reign. The prophets promise that Israel will return to the land.¹⁹ A new exodus is coming!²⁰ Yahweh will go before the nation and bring them back to Israel. The Lord does not only promise a new exodus but also a new creation. The mountains will drip with sweet wine, and all nature will be transformed, for there will be a new heaven and new earth. The Lord also pledges to make a new covenant with his people. Yahweh would write his law on the hearts of his people. He would pour out his spirit, and the Spirit would indwell their hearts so that they would do his will. Israel would gladly submit to Yahweh's rule, and the coming new creation would be a new paradise, but it would be a paradise better than the old paradise, for nothing will ever defile it.²¹

Nicodemus, being the teacher of Israel, should have known these things. He should have been as Abraham his father, who rejoiced to see the day of Jesus Christ, of whom Jesus said that he “rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

We next read that our Lord asserted the truth and reliability of His witness. We read in **verses 11 and 12** Jesus telling Nicodemus:

¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

It is at this point that the narrative transitions from a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus to a straight monologue of the Lord Jesus. It may transition into John the Apostle's own testimony at some point. It is difficult to discern the shift, however, from the words of Jesus to those of John the apostle. In other words, “red letter” editions have their problems here. Some favor concluding our Lord's words to Nicodemus with verse 15. My Reformation Study Bible in the NKJV has red letters of Jesus' speech through verse 21. [And so, the editors have Jesus speaking forth John 3:16.²²]

¹⁷ i.e. Jehovah

¹⁸ cf. Gen. 3:15

¹⁹ They did return from Babylon under Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel.

²⁰ This is not speaking of merely a physical return of ethnic Jews from the Babylonian exile, but it is a return “from exile” that continues to take place, as God calls a remnant of Jews and a multitude of Gentiles to salvation through Jesus Christ from the nations in which they are scattered (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1f), who then proceed to “follow Him” to their future entrance into the realized kingdom of God at the second coming of Christ. We are journeying from the place of exclusion and alienation—the nations—traveling to our heavenly Zion (cf. Heb. 12:22-24).

²¹ Thomas Schreiner, **The King in His Beauty; A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments** (Baker Academic, 2013), p. 421.

²² One of my pet peeves of the ESV is the combining of sayings of different persons into one paragraph. In my ESV version of the Reformation Study Bible, which is not a red letter edition, the editors put the words of both Nicodemus and Jesus in the same paragraph (verses 9-15). But then they place verses 17 through 21 into a separate paragraph, but they leave the quotation marks at the beginning and the end of this paragraph. Who is speaking? It is not clear, but one would assume they are placing the verses of 16 through 21 on the lips of Jesus.

Here in verse 11 is but another place in which our Lord began his statement with the double words, “Amen, Amen”, or, “Verily, Verily.” This is actually the third occasion in this passage (cf. 3:3, 5, 11). The doubling of this word spoken by Jesus is unique to John’s Gospel and is found 25 times in which three are here.

It is interesting that in verse 11 the Lord changed from speaking first person singular, “I” to first person plural, “We.”²³ Who does the “we” include? To whom was He referring? Perhaps to His own witness and that of John the Baptist. This was the understanding of **William Hendriksen**:

“The reference in all likelihood to Jesus himself and John the Baptist. The term *testify* immediately reminds one of what was said with reference to the Baptist (cf. 1:7, 8, 34). Besides, 3:5 points to the work of the forerunner.”²⁴

Matthew Poole thought that Jesus was referring only to His own witness and no other. “Christ speaketh only of himself, though he speaketh in the plural number, for in the next verse he saith only, ‘If I have told you earthly things’; he let Nicodemus know that he spake nothing but what he was certain of.”²⁵

D. A. Carson believed that Jesus spoke using the “we” in order to somewhat mock what Nicodemus said in verse 2.

“The simplest explanation for the plurals in this verse is that Jesus is sardonically aping the plural that Nicodemus affected when he first approached Jesus (v.2). ‘Rabbi’, Nicodemus said, ‘we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. ...’ ‘I tell you the truth’, responds Jesus, ‘we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen’ – as if to say, ‘We know one or two things too, we do!’²⁶

Perhaps **Herman Ridderbos** best explained the issue most thoroughly:

To be sure, 3:11, in distinction from 3:31 and other passages, speaks of “we,” as a fact that has given rise to divergent interpretations. Some think that Jesus here identifies himself with the prophets, but then one has to take “what we have seen” as referring to visions, which certainly does not fit Jesus. Others think the reference is to Jesus and John, a view that in my opinion is no less improbable (in view of “we have seen”). Nowadays many interpreters understand the “we” as the “we” of the church (the so-called *pluralis ecclesiasticus*). But such a change of subject from Jesus to the church is hard to accept because v. 11b is introduced with the emphatic “I say you” and because in v. 12 Jesus again speaks of himself in the first person.

“Bear witness,” in the Johannine (forensic) sense, is used, apart from Jesus himself, especially of his disciples as those “who were with him from the beginning,” who on that basis bore witness concerning him (cf. 15:27; 19:35; 21:24), and of whom it can therefore be said—though in another sense than of Jesus himself (cf. 1:18; 6:46; see, however, also 14:7, 9)—that they bear witness to what they have seen and heard (cf. 1 John 1:1ff; John 1:14). Accordingly, in v. 11b the plural presumably relates not only to Jesus but also to his disciples as those whom he brought into his mission from above from the beginning (cf. 6:69).²⁷

Our Lord pretty well dismisses the credibility of Nicodemus in his refusal, not just his inability, to receive his witness. Verse 12 records our Lord’s words to him, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” Here the earthly things are what Jesus had been discussing directly, the matter of the new birth, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the illustration of the

²³ Verse 11 is a problem with those translations that provide pronouns of deity with initial capital letters (of which I favor). My NKJV which is reflected in these notes, capitalizes the pronoun “We.” But if our Lord intended to refer to the witness of Himself and His disciples, then there is a problem with the capitalization of the English pronoun.

²⁴ William Hendriksen, **John**, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 132.

²⁵ Matthew Poole, **Commentary on the Holy Bible**, vol. 3 (Hendriksen Publishers, 2008), p. 291.

²⁶ D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 199.

²⁷ Herman Ridderbos, **The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary** (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 133.

wind. The heavenly things speak of other matters that our Lord did not address in this hearing. Unless Nicodemus understood and embraced the beginning of new life before God, how could he comprehend or even need to learn of the richness of blessing that his new birth would bring to him?

Nicodemus has found Jesus' teaching hard to understand, but Jesus turns that incredulity into a fundamental Christological question. Nicodemus had approached Jesus with a certain amount of respect (v. 2), but he had not even begun to appreciate who Jesus really was. At bottom, Nicodemus' failure was not a failure of intellect but a failure to believe Jesus' witness: *you people do not accept our testimony*. The failure to believe was more reprehensible than the failure to understand, since it betrayed a fundamentally inadequate appreciation of who Jesus is.²⁸

The point of the passage was not to motivate Nicodemus to seek being born again. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in that work. The point being made by Jesus was so that Nicodemus would know his need and his dependence on God showing him mercy. But there was something Nicodemus could do and should do. He was to believe on the Son so as to have everlasting life. We will begin to address this important opportunity and responsibility next Lord's Day, Lord willing.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.
The Lord be with you all. (2 Thess. 3:16)

²⁸ D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 199.