

John 3:1-15

- II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (1:19-12:50)
 - D. Jesus and the Passover, Part One (2:13-25)
 - E. The First Discourse – The New Birth, Part One (3:1-15)

As we move into chapter three, we come across the first of seven discourses – or teaching sections – of John. The Gospel of John records seven of Jesus' teachings for us, as well as seven of His miracles. Keep in mind that, the entire time, John is seeking to convey to his readers all that is necessary for eternal life. Anyone familiar with the Word of God knows what John 3 contributes. While we won't arrive at v. 16 until next week, there's still much to glean from Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus before the famous v. 16. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, *a ruler of the Jews* (v. 1). Having heard Jesus' teachings, and having borne witness of His *signs*, he now approaches Jesus to ask Him concerning them. Yet, he does so *by night* (v. 2).

Nicodemus (v. 2b): Nicodemus begins by admitting that the Pharisees *know that [He is] a teacher come from God* because of the miracles He was performing. This is a far cry from their response in Matthew 12:24, where they attribute His miracles to Satan! We don't know whether it was a different group within the Pharisees, or perhaps they were so fed up with Jesus at that point that they were easily jaded and deceived.

Jesus (v. 3): Jesus' response talks about being *born again*, which is what is necessary in order for someone to *see the kingdom of God*.¹ This is the passage from which we took our term "a born-again believer." It's a way we distinguish someone who might be a generic, cultural "Christian," from someone who has believed in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, and thus having eternal life. While *Christian* is indeed a biblical term (cf. Acts 11:26), it's lost a great deal of its exclusivity.

Nevertheless, even here, Jesus states a prerequisite for having eternal life: one must be *born again*. Jesus will elaborate in vv. 5-8, but for now, we note that the Greek word for *again* is also the word more commonly translated as *from above*.² It's not enough for someone to be of this earth – even if that's of a Jewish heritage – they must be born from above. Were you born into a Christian family? It's not enough. Did you attend church all your life? It's not enough. The prerequisite is to be *born from above*.

Nicodemus (v. 4): This statement confuses Nicodemus. He's trying to figure out in his mind how a grown man can reenter *his mother's womb and be born!*

Jesus (vv. 5-8): Jesus clarifies in vv. 5-8. To be born again is to be *born of water and the Spirit* (v. 5). The mention of *water* quite likely refers to the Holy Spirit's cleansing ministry.³ In this way, Jesus is distinguishing between a birth of *flesh* and a birth of *the Spirit*. Everyone who has ever lived has been *born of the flesh*. That's the only way to arrive on earth! There is no spiritual standing before God based upon our birth of *the flesh*. Yet, there is spiritual standing before God once someone is *born of the Spirit*. If Nicodemus, if the Pharisees, if all the Israelites wanted to be a part of the kingdom of God, they would need to be *born again*.

¹Given the context, I take *the kingdom of God* to refer especially to the future rule and reign of Jesus over the earth for one thousand years. But there's also a very real sense that believers today are members of the present Kingdom of God.

²Of its thirteen uses in the NT, see Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; John 3:3, 7, 31; 19:11, 23; James 1:17; 3:15, 17.

³Of the twenty-one times that John mentions *water*, seven of them refer to spiritual water (4:10, 11, 14, 15; 7:38). John 3:15 would make an eighth. In addition, the OT talks about the work of the Spirit in bringing about new life (Ezek 11:18-20; 29:29; 36:26-27; Isa 32:15-20; 44:3; Joel 2:28). As a Pharisee, this shouldn't be new for Nicodemus (cf. John 3:10).

Nicodemus (v. 9): Evidently, this didn't clear things up for Nicodemus in the slightest! *How can these things be?*⁴

Jesus (vv. 10-15): Jesus answers with a rebuke: *Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?* Jesus has spoken in a manner that should've been easily accessible to Nicodemus. Nicodemus should've been nodding his head in agreement, yet he's left scratching it, wondering what this Man is saying.

Jesus bears witness of Himself in v. 13, saying that *no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.*

But, as we draw to a close today in vv. 14-15, we do so with an Old Testament allusion. The parallel to our belief in Jesus is quite striking. Here, Jesus is referring to the occasion of Numbers 21:4-9. In Numbers 21, Moses is continuing to lead Israel around during their forty years in the wilderness. After noting their discouragement in v. 4, Moses writes in v. 5 that *the people spoke against God and against Moses.* It's the same old complaint from the Israelites: "We were better off in Egypt! And this manna is awful!" As a result, we read in v. 6 that *the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.*

It's at this point that the Israelites recognize their sin, and turn to the *LORD* for deliverance from the consequences of their sin (v. 7). God instructs Moses to *make a fiery [bronze] serpent, and set it on a pole* (v. 8). Whoever *looks at it, shall live* (v. 8). And, sure enough, in v. 9, we see that play out. Note well what's happening here! The Israelites sinned. They faced the punishment for their sins. They confessed their sins and looked to God to deliver them from His punishment. And by merely looking to the bronze serpent, the punishment was removed. He forgave them.

Back in John 3:14-15, Jesus says that, just as *Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must [must!] the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* We sinned. We face the punishment for our sins. But, when we confess our sins and look to God to deliver us from His punishment, He forgives us. Except now, it's not a mere bronze serpent to which we look, it's the *Son of Man* Himself⁵ who will be lifted up on a pole (or, as the case may be, a cross).⁶

In order to be *born again or born from above*, there are no works of the flesh required. Indeed, as the adage goes, "The only thing you contribute to your salvation is the sin that makes it necessary."⁷ The Holy Spirit does the work, bringing us to believe in Jesus' work on the cross for our sins. This meshes well with Jesus' illustration from Numbers 21. Confess your sin! Look to Jesus to fix that sin problem! In so doing, we become members of the Kingdom of God.

⁴Wilbur Pickering notes, "[Nicodemus'] philosophical orientation was based on keeping the Law, on human responsibility. Jesus introduces the divine factor, declaring it to be indispensable." *The Sovereign Creator Has Spoken*, 190.

⁵The bronze serpent didn't deliver anyone; God did. In fact, the day came when it needed to be destroyed because of the Israelites' attitude towards it (2 Kings 18:4). In contrast, Jesus is not only the One to whom we must look, but He Himself is the One who delivers us from God's wrath.

⁶We can almost see the cinematic masterpiece in the back of our minds. It's late in the 15th century BC, Moses is slowly hoisting up this bronze serpent on a pole; yet, superimposed in the background is Jesus being slowly hoisted up on His cross.

⁷This quote is popularly attributed to both Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and Philip Melanchton (1497-1560), but I can't verify either of those.