

The Gospel of John

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Chapter Three

John 3:1-3

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; (2) this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." (3) Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

John introduces Nicodemus as a man of distinction among the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a very strict religious order in contrast to the Sadducees, who were less strict in their beliefs and more political. He was a member of the ruling party or the Sanhedrin and would have thus been very interested in the current doctrinal trends. The Pharisees were a minority member of the Sanhedrin but had considerable influence. He was interested in Jesus because of the miracles He had done and wanted more information. The fact that he came by night does not necessarily mean that he was timid or reluctant to have anyone know of his visit. Because of the miracles he knew that God must be with Him but he did not know the details of His involvement with God. However he does not seem blinded by prejudice as were other religious leaders who even blamed demonic activity for the miracles of Jesus (John 8:48; Mark 3:22).

Even though Jesus did not have academic qualification, Nicodemus addressed Him as Rabbi, which would have had considerable weight because of his rank. Jesus saw the man's heart and immediately recognized his real problem that needed addressing. He then replied in a way that must have shocked Nicodemus greatly. It is not easy to determine the time interval between writings in the Gospels but it is likely that the answer by Jesus was immediate as recorded by John. The KOG is presented in the OT as His eternal and universal rule (Exodus 15:18; Ps 103:19). This kingdom is represented on earth by the chosen people of God: the Israelites. People from other nations could become proselytes to Israel and thus enter a time of newness of life like a new-born child. Nicodemus would have understood this concept of being born again but what would it mean to a true Israelite like him? The Synoptics state that a person must receive the kingdom of God like a child (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; Matt 18:3). It is difficult for a mature person to start life over again as a child so it is easy to understand how Jesus could say that it is hard to enter the KOG (Mark 10:24).

When Jesus is quoted as giving requirements for seeing the KOG, He means to be a full member of that kingdom with all the requirements and responsibilities. To a person like Nicodemus "seeing the KOG" would mean participation in the age to come or eternal life with God. However Jesus is quoted as speaking of a KOG that exists now. The Greek word *anōthen* means "from above" or "anew" and is translated above as "again" in "born again". To those who have read chapter one they know that this means being born into the family of God so to become children of God but Nicodemus would not have known this background. His bewildered reply is then understandable.

John 3:4-5

*Nicodemus *said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (5) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

Was Nicodemus perhaps referring to reincarnation? Plato (427-347 B.C.) taught of the immortality of the soul and that upon physical death of the body the soul returns to the heavens if its course had been just and honorable. But if the soul had not been just and honorable it appeared again in the form of another man or an animal. It is then possible that he knew of Plato's teachings and was asking about the soul returning. Most interpreters do not believe this was his thinking at this point in his life.

If Nicodemus thought Jesus was referring to proselytes he could have understood such a reference. He might have then meant that after a man becomes older and set in his ways it is very difficult to begin over with new basic understandings. But it seemed that Jesus was referring this rebirth to him. His reply made it obvious that he did not understand the statement of Jesus at all. He replied in a rather curt manner stating an obvious ridiculous application of being physically born again. Jesus then answered him with obvious applications he, as a Jewish leader, would have understood. God had promised to Israel the same as stated by Jesus:

Ezekiel 36:25-27 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. (26) "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (27) "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The cleansing by water was used as the authority for baptism of proselytes. John B. asked his hearers to accept water baptism at his hands even though they were true Israelites. John B. also said that another would come who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit: "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matt 3:11).

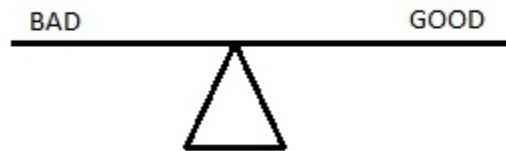
The Jewish leaders would have known of the work of John B. and so perhaps Nicodemus was also sent to investigate his actions. Jesus is that One promised by John B. and now Jesus is urging Nicodemus to accept the full promise. Baptism by water represents repentance that is required of every believer and being born of the Spirit brings a person into the full spiritual realm of the Kingdom of God. The evangelist's readers would have long since incorporated water baptism into their development of Christianity so they also would understand this statement by Jesus. The new birth requires repentance and transformation by spiritual birth by the Holy Spirit in response to the action of God on the person. The first words of Jesus in His ministry stated the requirement of repentance: "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 4:17) The evangelist then records the dual requirement of entrance into the KOG.

John 3:6-9

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (8) "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (9) Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus further clarified His statement. Just as it is obvious that one can enter the physical realm only by a fleshly birth, it should also be obvious that one can enter the spiritual realm only by a second birth by the Holy Spirit. John then makes it certain that Jesus said these remarks apply to everyone and not just to Nicodemus by changing to the plural form of “you”, meaning that everyone must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God. I often say that Christianity is not a religion because to become a member of a religious group one only has to agree to its teachings but in Christianity one must be born again by the Holy Spirit. Then the learning begins, not as a requirement for membership, but as an action of one who is now in the family of God and desires to please His Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The same Greek word, *pneuma*, is used twice in verse 8. It is first translated “wind” and second as “Spirit”. In the vision of Ezekiel 37, the work of the wind is a parable of the work of the Spirit. Here the same interpretation applies. Nobody can control the work of the Holy Spirit or understand His origin or where He will go next. However the effect of His work is clearly seen as a person is transformed into a new member of the KOG. Nicodemus still does not grasp the full meaning of the teaching of Jesus. He had always been a member of a works-based religion and this method of initiation into the KOG was totally foreign to him. This works-based salvation can be demonstrated by the diagram:



This salvation picture means that if the person’s good works out-weigh his bad works then he will enter heaven. His reply should not be interpreted as expressing incredulity but as a plea for direction. Jesus was telling him that his descendency from Abraham was not sufficient for him to be a member of the KOG. Paul also clarified this relationship to Abraham: “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.” (Gal 3:7) Also being a child of Christian parents does not guarantee that the person will also be a Christian. The born-again experience is a blessing from God and each individual must experience such to be a child of God.

John 3:10-13

Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? (11) "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. (12) "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (13) "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.

Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel and he would have clearly understood if Jesus had spoken of things that had to be done to enter the KOG but Jesus was telling him something he had never heard before. This was also my situation when I was born again the fall of 1970. I had been in the church all my life but had been taught of works based salvation. I knew that I could not obey God completely so I considered my situation hopeless. Nicodemus actually thought that he was being obedient to God so being told that something else was required was a mystery to him. It

was not until I read John 16 that I understood what was required. However Nicodemus should not have been so incredulous of this information for there are examples in the OT of miraculous actions of God needed such as: Noah and his family being brought through the flood (Gen 6:13-9:19), Naaman the Syrian's "baptism" in Jordan when his flesh was restored to that of a young child (2 Kings 5:14), and the Israelites' crossing of the sea of reeds (Ex 14:15-15:21). The Naaman incident was considered a precedent for proselyte-baptism. But from none of these events did Nicodemus learn of the requirement for regeneration to enter the KOG.

John writes in verse 11 as though Jesus were speaking in a plural form. We do not know precisely why he writes this way. It could be that the disciples were with Jesus and He was speaking in respect to their group teachings. He could also be speaking regarding the Trinity. He could also be quoting Jesus speaking in a "royal we" or a majestic plural that was used by people who were in a high office. Such is used by someone to denote their excellence or power and certainly that would apply to Jesus. Editors will sometimes use this method when giving their opinions as spokespersons for their literary occupation. Since Jesus fits these categories I am assuming such is the reason for the "royal we". The "you" in verse 11 is also plural so John is telling us that here Jesus is referring to all the Jews and not just to Nicodemus. Jesus certainly speaks with the authority of God, which was an attribute that marveled many people during His ministry. Nicodemus cannot accept the rudimentary teachings of Jesus so he certainly would not be able to understand the more abstract concepts from heaven. The baptism by the Holy Spirit to initiate a person's rebirth is certainly a border-line case involving both heaven and earth but it is exacted on the earthly level. Jesus does not have to ascend to heaven to learn of such concepts because He is from there and descended to earth. Jesus then refers to Himself in His favorite manner as the Son of Man. To Jesus the new birth is an elementary teaching but it astounds Nicodemus. At the writing of this gospel by John, Jesus has already ascended back to heaven.

John 3:14-17

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; (15) so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. (16) "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (17) "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

The bronze serpent lifted up by Moses (Num. 21:5-9) was God's action to physically heal any Israelites who were bitten by the poisonous serpents. The serpent had no healing actions in itself but God worked through the faith of those who looked upon it with expectation of God's action. Certainly anyone who had been bitten, looked upon the bronze serpent and were healed would consider that they had been physically "born again". The lifting up of the Son of Man would serve a similar purpose for a spiritual rebirth of those who believed the action behind the lifting up of Jesus. Whoever believes in Him would have eternal life. Verse 15 is probably the last interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus.

John does not continue to let us know what happened to Nicodemus but his actions are reported later (John 7:50; 19:39) do give us some indication of what happened to him spiritually. John now generalizes the teachings. Probably verse 16 is the most known verse in the Bible by Christians and many non-Christians. The Greek for "in Him" is "*eis auto*" rather than "*en auto*" where using the word "*eis*" indicates a complete entrance rather than just getting close as the use of "*en*" means. Some years ago there were some people talking about a "near-death" experience,

which would be “en” death. But we should only be interested in the one person who had an “eis” death experience: Jesus Christ. The people with a “near-death” experience did not really experience death. Jesus Christ fully experienced death for us and we should only be interested in His statements about death. This verse is a summation of the entire fourth gospel for we see here the great love of God so that He would sacrifice His only Son so that some might have eternal life with Him. There will be a day of judgment but it has not come even yet as Paul stated: “on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.” (Rom 2:16) You are referred to three of my letters on judgment for an elaboration on this topic (LT1236, 37, 38 at <http://LivingTheology.com/letters2012.htm>) The sending of Jesus to do the work of the Father was for salvation so that those who believe in Jesus will not have to face the wrath of God in the Day of Judgment (John 5:26-29).

John 3:18-21

"He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (19) "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. (20) "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. (21) "But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

There is no judgment for those who are in Christ because the wrath of God is diverted from the one who was a sinner unto Jesus Christ:

- Rom 8:1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- John 5:24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.
- John 3:18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John will make this even clearer later in his gospel: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (John 3:36) John also has already written that those who believe in Jesus are adopted into God's family (John 1:12). There will be a final day of judgment (John 5:26-29) that confirms what has already passed. The purpose of Jesus was to bring to light the judgment already passed. Jesus said that He did not come to judge and verse 18 reveals that judgment has already been passed.

The verse that is parallel to verse 19 is 1 John 1:8-9. Unbelievers run from the light and believers seek the light for further illumination and for verification. Preferring darkness is sin against the Holy Spirit. Some people need a Damascus road experience like Paul to shake them out of their darkness. People are judged by their response to whatever light they receive but those shunning the light reveal their judgment. People who practice evil hate the light and try to extinguish it, but that is impossible. Such people hate Christians because they hate the source of the light: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you." (John 15:18)

John 3:22-24

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. (23) John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized-- (24) for John had not yet been thrown into prison.

This period of the ministry of Jesus is not included in the Synoptic gospels. It happened before the arrest and imprisonment of John B. Jerusalem is in Judea so what does John mean when he states that Jesus came into the land of Judea? He probably means that they went into the Judean county districts outside of Jerusalem. This is the only mention of Jesus baptizing in His ministry. But we read in John 4:2 that Jesus did not baptize anyone personally so John probably means that His group was baptizing. John B. was also baptizing probably in the region of Samaria, which was part of the Roman province of Judea. The exact location of Aenon is unknown but it was chosen because of the large amount of water there needed for baptizing many people. Aenon means “springs” so it was well known for its water. John clarifies that John B. had not yet been thrown into prison to let his readers know that these events occurred before those recorded in the Synoptic gospels: “Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God,” (Mark 1:14).

John 3:25-30

Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification. (26) And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him." (27) John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. (28) "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' (29) "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. (30) "He must increase, but I must decrease.

The argument probably concerned the relationship between the Jewish purification practice for converts. However the question also aroused concern among the disciples of John B. about whose baptizing was justified since John B. had already been asked about his authority to baptize. The crowds were growing around the work of Jesus and were diminishing around the work of John B. The “they” of verse 26 is probably the disciples of John B. since John said that one Jew came and asked about purification. Other translations state “with Jews” but that is not a good translation. The disciples of John B. addressed John B. as Rabbi showing great respect but they were confused because it seemed that Jesus was receiving more attention than John B.

But John B. showed no jealousy at all and clearly stated that Jesus was the greater. John B. stated that each person was given a ministry from God with the charge to complete it. John B. further states that the disciples were witnesses to his statement that he was not the Christ but that he was the messenger of the coming Christ (John 1:20). His baptizing for repentance was preparatory for the greater baptizing by the Spirit from the Coming One.

At a wedding the best man does not complain because he is not the bridegroom for he is there to assist the bridegroom in the ceremony. The best man’s role is complete and he is satisfied with his role when the wedding goes as planned and the couple enjoys each other in their new relationship. Considerable discussion has been made about whether this simile relates to the bride being the church or the nation Israel. However such discussion seems premature and

pushing the matter too far. John has already stated that His people did not accept Him: “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.” (John 1:11). The point John B. makes to his disciples is that his joy has been made full by his role in this great work of God and they should also be joyous to have been associated with him. He then makes it very clear that the Son will shine and his light will diminish in comparison.

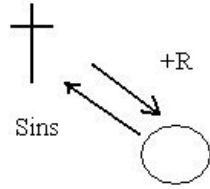
John 3:31-36

"He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. (32) "What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. (33) "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. (34) "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. (35) "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. (36) "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

The evangelist now adds his comments to this situation as the words of Jesus ceased to be recorded in verse 15 and the words of John B. in verse 30. John explains that the Word came from above and also is above all. There is no intention of an evil influence in being “from the earth” but is meant to distinguish further from John, John B. and Jesus. Only Jesus is from heaven so that He can testify of what He has actually seen and experienced. Jesus is also above all for He is the Son of God. Those who do not accept His testimony remain in their judgment. Those who receive the testimony of Jesus could be compared to someone endorsing a check to cash it for they testify that it is true and they accept it into their account.

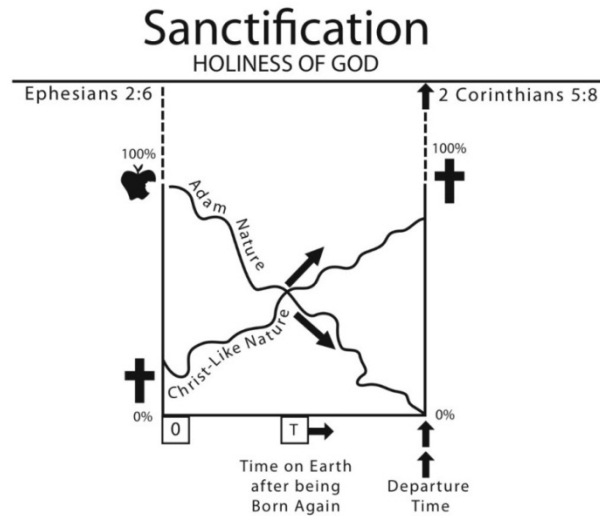
The last OT prophet was John B. and each received the measure of the Holy Spirit needed for their mission but the Holy Spirit remains on Jesus: “John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him.” (John 1:32). This allotment of the Spirit to Jesus is inferred by John at the end of verse 34. Verse 35 elaborates on this love of Jesus by the Father in that He gives all things under His rule.

Verse 36 sums up what has already been stated about the new birth that gives believers membership in the family of God (John 1:12). This verse is the only place in this gospel that the word “wrath” appears and it is not a sudden burst of temper but the divine reaction of righteousness to unrighteousness that abides on those who refuse to accept the gift of grace. It is a forever reaction to those who refuse the light of the Word. The gift of faith from God results in people having the ability to believe, trust, and obey the Son of God and to receive entrance into the KOG for life forever with God. Righteousness is a fundamental aspect of the moral law of the universe that cannot be ignored any more than one can ignore the physical laws of the universe. The retribution of God to those who disobey His moral law will be forever. Only those who believe the truth of the work of Jesus Christ have received the righteousness of Jesus Christ into their accounts and thus are righteous before God. This process is called double imputation as our sins are placed on Jesus so that He receives the wrath of the Father and the righteousness of Jesus are put into our accounts before God:



2 Cor 5:21
Double Imputation

Believers still have to work out that salvation in their lives on earth in the process called sanctification:



The zero time above is the time when the person is born again and the departure time is the time of death or the Parousia. Nobody ever achieves a 100% Christ-like nature while living and the Adam nature (sin nature) never goes completely to zero during that time. However we are commanded to participate in this process:

Phil 2:12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;