

John 3:1–15 (ESV)

¹ 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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

He knows the heart of men

At the end of the passage, we read that many believed in his name based on the signs. **What might be suspect about this belief?** Notice the contrast with the disciples, who remembered these things after he was raised and believed the Scriptures and the word he spoke.

This verse is a transition into the next passage where the discussion turns to what constitutes true belief and the need of a new birth. Jesus did not entrust himself to any man, because he knew what was in man, now there was a man named Nicodemus...and this man exemplifies the belief of those at the festival. "We know you are a teacher sent from God because you do these signs." **Is this a belief that saves?**

Jesus knows what is in man, in general. He understands the human heart, it's propensity to sin and evil, betrayal and deception. He needs no one to tell him this, because he is the one who searches the hearts. This is another testimony to who Jesus is - it is YHWH, the LORD, who searches the heart - as Jeremiah 17:10 testifies, or 1 Chronicles 28:9, which tells us that the Lord searches all hearts and understands every thought and plan.

Nicodemus - The Teacher of Israel

Now, Nicodemus was a representative of the Pharisees, a Rabbi, well-versed in Scripture and Theology. He may have been quite prominent, seeing that Jesus names as "the" teacher of Israel.

A couple things to note about how this story is setup in relation to what preceded and what follows:

The pattern of replacement - in each account, Jesus is portrayed as fulfilling and making obsolete an existing religious institution.

- In the wedding at Cana, Jesus takes the ritual purification jars and uses them to supply the banquet with new wine. The significance of the purification jars is to point to that fact that God is doing a new thing from within the old Jewish system. Jesus has taken the old vessels of purification and made them obsolete for that purpose - he has filled them with a new purpose. The coming of Christ has brought fulfillments to these old rituals and to cling to them now will become a hinderance.

- At the temple, he prophetically enacts judgment on the existing Temple system and declares himself to be the true and perfect Temple of God.
- Now here, Jesus positions himself as the real Teacher of Israel in contrast to Nicodemus who does not even understand earthly things. He is the one who truly understands and expounds the Scripture, and through whom we can be born anew and understand heavenly things.

These are some of the key pillars, so to speak, of first century Judaism - ritual purification, temple worship, and teaching of the Torah - and Jesus positions himself as the fulfillment of these.

Jesus' Dialogue Partners - This chapter begins with Nicodemus, a Jew, a male, educated, and well-respected in society. The following chapter, with the woman at the well, we find a Samaritan, a woman, presumably uneducated, and an outcast in society. In both cases, they misunderstand what Jesus is talking about and are in need of divine aid to understand. When it comes to knowing Christ, it does not matter what your background or your pedigree, all are equally welcome and all are equally in need. As Paul said in Philippians 3, I count all things as loss - my Jewish pedigree, my Pharisaism, my zeal for God - all of it as loss for the sake of knowing Christ.

Nicodemus comes by night - John includes this little detail at the beginning of the narrative. **What is the significance of night?** It's very likely that he wants to avoid being seen visiting Jesus, particularly after the incident at the Temple. Night has a theological significance in John, indicated darkness and unbelief. Jesus is the light coming into the dark world, but the world has preferred darkness rather than light. Nicodemus, however, approaches the light.

Jesus - The Teacher of Nicodemus

Jesus wastes no time in taking this discussion to a deeper level. He says, anyone who will see the Kingdom of God must first undergo a new birth. This throws Nicodemus for a loop, since the common teaching in the first century was that being born of Abraham was sufficient to be included in the people of God, and that all children of Abraham would see the kingdom. Now Jesus is indicating that this birth is not the decisive one for entering the kingdom.

You must be born again

The word that is translated "born again" can also be translated born from above. Based on the fact that everywhere else, John uses this word to mean from above, it's very likely he's created a play on words with his meaning being primarily that you must be born from above and Nicodemus misunderstanding and taking it that you literally must be born again, in the sense of coming out of your mother's womb a second time. This misunderstanding perfectly exemplifies Jesus' message - without the work of the Holy Spirit in a new birth, it's not possible to understand, believe, and enter the Kingdom. Seeing signs is not sufficient, more help is needed.

Jesus is declaring that a complete change in nature is required, a new birth. We must undergo a radical transformation. Without being born of water and spirit, you cannot see the Kingdom of God. **Considering that Jesus is surprised that Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, did not know this, what do you think he means by the phrase "water and spirit"?**

When Jesus speaks of being born of water and the Spirit, he is speaking of the great coming renewal promised in the the prophets, spoken of by Ezekiel (36:25-27) as a cleansing by water and being filled with the Spirit.

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (Ezekiel 36:25–27, ESV)

Again, Isaiah speaking of this restoration:

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants." (Isaiah 44:3, ESV)

This is, essentially, the new covenant promise, similar to what you see in Jeremiah 31:31-33 or Deut. 30 where God promises to give them a new spirit and write his commandments on their hearts. This new era, this new

exodus and end of exile, was announced by John the Baptist (c.f. The voice of one crying in the wilderness) and is dawning in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Because of his work, the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh, hearts will be changed, and only through this one can enter into the Kingdom of God (cf. Also Titus 3:3-7.)

Of course, as Jesus reveals, the Spirit is not bound by Temple or Torah, by Sacrifice or Washings or Keeping of the Law, but moves as He wills. This would effectively turn Nicodemus' world upside down. Nicodemus' responses get shorter and shorter, and finally he just asks "how can this be?"

Jesus calls Nicodemus the "Teacher of Israel" but has just revealed himself as the true Teacher of Israel. It is only by means of the one who gives the Spirit that we can enter the kingdom of God, and only by him may we emerge from the darkness and enter the light.

Where's your Spiritual Birth Certificate

Thinking a little more about the new birth - If you consider the birth certificate, it certifies that we were born at a certain time and in a certain place. What it doesn't certify, because such a thing is absurdly unnecessary, is that we were actually born. Our existence testifies to that. If we lose our birth certificate, we aren't going to have difficulty persuading people that we were indeed born. The same thing is true when it comes to the new birth - what matters is not so much your testimony to prove you've been born from above, but whether your confession and life are consistent with one who has been.

Heavenly vs Earthly things

What is it that distinguishes Jesus from all who have come before him? He is uniquely qualified to declare heavenly things because he alone descended from heaven. The earthly things, such as the signs and miracles, and even the witness of the Scriptures, which Jesus expects Nicodemus to know, they all bear witness to and are signpost pointing to Jesus and what he has come to do. The teaching of the necessity of regeneration, the need for a new birth, is a key theme in the Old Testament, and Nicodemus should know it. And yet, Nicodemus has not understood these things, so how could he even begin to understand and accept the

deeper teaching of the kingdom? It is only by the Spirit that this can come.

Serpent in the wilderness

Now Jesus proceeds to answer his questions, namely - How can this new birth happen? His answer is that it's only by means of his death and resurrection. The "Son of Man" must be "lifted up." Throughout the Old Testament, this phrase speaks of being exalted or great - of particular note is Isaiah 52:13, at the beginning of the song of the Suffering Servant who suffers vicariously for the sins of Israel, where is written:

“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.” (Isaiah 52:13, ESV)

However, in this gospel the words "lifted up" are speaking primarily of Jesus being lifted up on the cross, which serves as the means of his exaltation to glory. Similar to the story of the chief baker and cupbearer in Genesis, where Joseph predicts that Pharaoh will lift up the chief cupbearer's head and restore him to his office, and then he predicts that Pharaoh will lift up the baker's head and hang him on a tree. Both of these things will happen to Jesus - he will be lifted up on a tree to die in the place of sinners, and will be raised from the dead and lifted up to the right hand of the Father and restored to his rightful place.

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.” (Numbers 21:4–9, ESV)

Jesus refers to Numbers 21 and draws the analogy with his own death -

even as the serpent on the pole brought healing and life to the people in the wilderness, so also anyone who looks with faith upon the Son of Man will be given salvation and eternal life. Humanity has been bitten by a deadly snake, has contracted a deadly disease, and the only cure is to believe in the Lord Jesus and be healed.

Drawing on this story in Numbers, what is it that brings healing to the people? What is it that brings life to those who believe?

Jesus speaks universally - all the believing ones - not just Israel as was the case with the serpents. This is another common theme hinted at through John - the rescue mission Jesus is on is not only for the Jews, but for the whole world.

¹ This could be referring to baptism, both by water and by the Spirit. Water baptism began with John's baptism of repentance and was carried on by Jesus' disciples. And, as John declared, Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. Never in the early church was it even considered that someone would be a Christian without both of these things. The baptism of the Spirit does not replace the need for water baptism.