

Nicodemus Comes to Jesus

John 3:1-21

John chapter 2 and chapter 3 are related. “In contrast to the many in Jerusalem who “believed” but to whom Jesus refused to commit himself, Nicodemus looms as one to whom the Lord opened his heart, one who became a true disciple. At the same time the passage emphasizes an earlier theme – the limitations of current Judaism – by showing the inability of this leader to comprehend the spiritual truth enunciated by Jesus.” Wycliffe Bible Commentary p. 1077

Nicodemus the Man:

- **Genuine and Sincere Heart:** Luke 8:15 The night Nicodemus came to Jesus, he had a genuine and sincere heart but it was strongly influenced by his own belief system and profoundly blind spiritually. But we all are in this state before salvation!
 1. Motivation to come was the miracles We see a connecting thought between chapters 2-3 of John. These miracles, though at this time only one was given in detail, had caused many to place a superficial belief in Jesus. Yet they did them as true believers. Their hopes were based on what they could receive from Jesus, not on who He was! But the miracles did catch the eye of the Religious Leaders. v. 2 Notice, no one, friends or enemies of Jesus, ever doubted the fact He was doing legitimate miracles.
 2. Nighttime visit – The fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night is always mentioned with Nicodemus. (John 7; 19) We really don't know why he came to Jesus at night. Theories suggest: 1) Didn't want to be seen by peers or students. Interaction with Religious Leaders after the cleansing of the temple was hostile and argumentative. There is no doubt, Nicodemus heard of Jesus' action and the conversation afterward. 2) Wanted a quiet, private, uninterrupted conversation with Jesus. Both men were busy during the day. We will later see in the life of Christ, Religious Leaders loved to send hirelings or messengers to Jesus to ask questions or try and trip Him up. But this must have been too important to Nicodemus!
 3. Pharisee/Ruler/Teacher of the Jews - Very Religious and Pious

A lifetime student of the Old Testament Nicodemus would have been a professional student of the Scripture. This sect desired a Jewish kingdom having freedom in their worship.

A teacher of teachers “master of Israel” v. 10 At Pharisee conferences, Nicodemus would have been a keynote speaker! The statement in verse 10 states Jesus' scolding of Nicodemus concerning his ignorance, “Art thou a master of Israel,” but most scholars believe a better translation is, “Art thou **the** master of Israel,” The article is much stronger and specific---not just a master teacher---but the master teacher!

A ruler – Member of the Sanhedrin As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have been zealous for ritual, religious purity in accordance to the law of Moses, as well as the Pharisaic

traditions. He was not a priest or Levite but also one of the 71 ruling Sanhedrin – or Jewish court members. Nicodemus was an elite Jewish leader!

- Limited Insight on the person of Jesus: (Verse 2)
 1. Positive – He recognized that Jesus was **from God**. Don't miss that this alone was quite a stretch for the older, distinguished teacher of the law. Jesus had no formal training, was from Nazareth of Galilee, and was totally out of the norm of Jewish thought. Yet, he understood Jesus was from God. Also Nicodemus gave Jesus the titles of Rabbi – a special title for Jewish teachers of distinction, and a teacher! All of this was based on the many undocumented miracles Jesus had done.
 2. Negative – Nicodemus saw Jesus as a teacher from God, but not a prophet or Messiah! He was not ready in his opening statement to go that far! Woman at the well - prophet John 4:19
- Hints to Nicodemus' purpose: A careful reading of the first few verses of John 3 sees Nicodemus doing what he would have normally done - controlled and directed conversation. But notice, Jesus only allowed him to get through his first thought and introduction. I see Jesus hijacking poor Nicodemus carefully planned interview outline and going straight to the subject matter – the entrance of the kingdom of God! See, Pharisees desired the Jewish nation to become as it had once been under David and Solomon – self-ruling, world-dominating, with the ability to worship God as they desired. The Old Testament had promised that the Messiah, the son of David, would sit on David's throne and rule once again. Faithful Jews waited for this day! We can confidently surmise Nicodemus had come that night to talk to Jesus about the entrance of the kingdom. Strange events had happened in the last few years, the message and baptism of John, now this man's amazing, obviously God-given signs and wonders. If Jesus was here to bring in the kingdom, if they shared the same goals, perhaps a coalition of strengths would be in order!
- Outcome of Interview: Jesus certainly gave Nicodemus more theology and teaching than he ever had dreamed. I'm sure Nicodemus would look back on that night and realize he went to interview a miracle worker, and instead sat with the God incarnate and was taught from His lips. It is wonderful to understand that those words did not go to a hard heart. Nicodemus is found three times in the book of John. Readers can watch a wonderful moving in Nicodemus as he is found rejection his old ways and a coming to faith in Jesus the Messiah. John 3 – Interview with Jesus; John 7 – Asking his fellow rulers to give Jesus a just hearing; John 19 – Nicodemus along with another Religious Leader, Joseph of Arimathea, takes Jesus' body from the cross and places it in the tomb.

I. Nicodemus in Control

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: ²The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles (Gk - signs) that thou doest, except God be with him.” John 3:1-2

We see here a connection between the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. The English translations are equally divided between “There was a man...” and “Now there was a man...” also the words “But” and “And” are also used to start verse 1. Scholars are united in saying the chapter division cuts into the flow of thought.

“we know that thou art a teacher come from God:” – The word “we” is Nicodemus speaking as a ruler and leader among the Pharisees. He is referring to at least some Religious Leaders and elders that are recognizing Jesus’ signs as evidence of authority given by God. Don’t forget, there will be some of the religious class that will believe in Jesus! (John 12:42; Acts 6:7)

Miracles = “God be with him” – Nicodemus and his fellow rulers were ready to concede that Jesus was a teacher from God based on the miracles. This would mean that Jesus was one that had more power than John, who did no miracles.

II. Jesus in Control

“³Jesus answered (no question asked, only in the heart of Nicodemus) and said unto him, Verily, verily (“truly, truly”), I say unto thee, Except a man (Gk word is gender neutral – man or woman) be born again (Gk - “born from above”), he cannot see the kingdom of God. ⁴Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? ⁵Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye (Gk – this word is plural “you all”) must be born again (Gk - “born from above”). ⁸The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” John 3:3-8

The Great Interruption! – Nicodemus’ purpose was **hijacked** by Jesus. It is obvious Nicodemus came to talk about the kingdom because Jesus goes directly to the subject. But instead of discussing the take over from the Romans or the development of a new nation, Jesus interrupts with the fact Nicodemus can **never see or enter** the kingdom unless he is born again!

“born again”/ “born of the Spirit” – This whole passage, v. 3-8, is about being born again. 8 times the word “born” is used! In verses 3, 5, and 7, Jesus is giving this same principle. “born from above.” We only find this term in the book of John. Nicodemus needed to be born from above to be part of the kingdom! In his book The Gospel According to John, DA Carson, a modern evangelical scholar, said this of Nicodemus, “If Nicodemus, with his knowledge, gifts, understanding, position and integrity cannot enter the promised kingdom by virtue of his standing and works, what hope is there for anyone who seeks salvation along such lines? Even for a Nicodemus, there must be a radical transformation, the generation of new life, comparable with physical birth.” p. 190

“born of water and of the Spirit” – There are at least four given possible interpretations of this phrase. 1) One always mentioned but immediately dismissed is water baptism. The fact is there is no basis in Scripture for baptismal regeneration – born again by baptism. You cannot find it. Jesus will spend the rest of the conversation speaking of the work of the Spirit, Son, Father, and Faith. Baptism is not part of this conversation. 2) Another held thought is physical birth in comparison with spiritual birth. This does hold as a good possibility. Verse 4 has Nicodemus speaking of physical birth, and verse 6 has Jesus speaking of physical birth. Many scholars hold to this interpretation. But many hold that the **Greek seems to indicate only one birth is being described here.** 3) Some say it is the World of God and the Holy Spirit. This is truth, both play roles to bring one to Christ. But this thought is developed in the New Testament and something Nicodemus would not have known. 4) But this next interpretation is easily seen when you listen to your high school English teacher in your head and look

carefully at the context. You might be surprised to know she would tell me I had a tendency to be wordy. The Greek allows you to make the KJV more concise. Instead of “born of water and of the Spirit” you suddenly have “born of water and spirit” a water/spirit source. I have also learned that the Greek did not indicate capitalization. This was supplied by man, seemingly poorly here. Later, in the conversation Jesus will chide Nicodemus for not understanding this principle though he was a master teacher of the Old Testament. The key is in this statement. It’s found in the Old Testament. This was also preached in Acts. (Acts 10:43)

One of the clearest Old Testament passages is **Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:24-29; 37-1-14; Ps. 24:3-10; Isaiah 55:6-7** There must be a cleansing – repentance and turning from sin. Usually the Old Testament will refer to a national repentance, but Jesus is speaking of the need of personal renewal – referred to as hearts of stone turned to hearts desiring to do God’s will. We can go to verses in the Epistles that refer to the Holy Spirit work --- and some feel Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit’s work in salvation, but as Jesus scolded Nicodemus he was speaking of a principle found in the Old Testament he should have understood. Holy Spirit working was a veiled mystery in the Old Testament. I’ll finish this with a quote from Carson, “Apparently Nicodemus had not thought of the Old Testament passages this way. If he was like some other Pharisees, he was too confident of the quality of his own obedience to think he needed much repentance (Luke 7:30), let alone to have his whole life cleansed and his heart transformed, to be born again.” p. 195

Old Testament Principle of Change – The Old Testament called men to seek God, follow His ways, and live by faith. We see this pattern throughout the Old Testament. Men either sought to follow the precepts of God found in His word or lived their own way in sin and misery. God called these rebellious ones to spiritual cleansing and transformation, the master-teacher Nicodemus should have known and taught this. (Galatians 3:22-25) Doubtless, he had taught other conditions for entrance into the kingdom of God – being a son of Abraham, obedient to the law and traditions – but he is learning these works of righteousness does not save us, but God’s mercy and love. Nicodemus and his religious system was so hung-up on a nationalistic kingdom of God they missed the kingdom centered on a right relationship with God.

The teacher is stumped by the Teacher – In Nicodemus’ mind, the Kingdom of God would be ruled by God and Israel would have a great part. In Jesus is teaching, the kingdom would be for the world, and one must be born again to enter it. It was a personal and spiritual kingdom not national.

Illustrations of Jesus: Teaching with illustration was a technique used by the Pharisees. But here the great teacher Nicodemus is being taken to class by Jesus the Son of God! Christ will use two illustrations and an Old Testament event to help start an understanding to Nicodemus!

“flesh is flesh” / “Spirit is spirit” – The first and second birth is illustrated for Nicodemus. Flesh gives birth to flesh – earthly – the first birth is of the flesh. The “born again” – second birth is the “spirit is spirit” – spiritual, God work. Being “born again” is this second birth!

Here is where Jesus inserts – “Marvel not” or “Don’t be surprised” “that I said unto thee, Ye (Gk - all) must be born again.” The older teacher of the law must have looked very confused! We see Jesus revealing what Nicodemus is feeling before he even says, “How can this happen?”

“wind bloweth” – You can almost hear Jesus say, “Don’t let this bother and derail you Nicodemus. Just as one cannot explain the comings and going of the wind so one cannot explain or predict the moving of

God in man. You can see the evidence of wind just as you can observe the working of God in other's lives. Don't feel you must understand how God gives new birth. You can't, just enjoy the results!"

**“⁹Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? (Lit. - ”How can this happen?”)
¹⁰Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a (Gk - the) master of Israel, and knowest not these things? ¹¹Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? ¹³And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: ¹⁵That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:9-15**

“We speak that we know, and testify that we have seen;” – The pronoun “we” is interesting. 1) the disciples – probably not, at this time, they were just months into following Jesus and were still coming to an understanding of who He was. 2) the Godhead – could be. In other conversations Jesus will refer to the Father and Holy Spirit as “we” – John 14:23. 3) Jesus and Old Testament prophets – I like this idea, it seems to stay nicely within the context. “Both the prophets and I have given you these principles. We can only speak of what we have known and seen.” Acts 10:34-43; 13:22-32

“earthly things, and ye believe not” – The “earthly things,” – would be the message to Nicodemus that he “must be born again.” His righteous earthly life, and Jewish pedigree was not enough to allow him into the kingdom! Nicodemus could not believe this. It was so outside his religious system and thought...but it was not God's thoughts! Nicodemus was willing to say Jesus was from God but could neither believe or understand (v.10) Him!

“how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?” – Nicodemus seemed to come to Jesus to ask concerning the kingdom of God. The qualifications of entering the kingdom were immediately on Jesus' lips. The key was “believe” – used 7x in v. 11-21 an act of faith! Jesus knew He could not expand on the heavenly aspects of the kingdom. Nicodemus was not willing to embrace the words of Jesus.

“he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” – “Son of man” is a Messianic title. Jesus has the authority to speak these things, He was from heaven! (John 6:32, 51; 16:28; I Cor. 15:47) He taught what He knew, Nicodemus was to accept it on that authority. Jesus is saying, “I am from Heaven and have the authority to teach this.” No one went to heaven and returned with a message, only Jesus came down! “which is in heaven” is not found in the some manuscripts and often translations omit it or it is given, “who is in heaven”; “who was from heaven” or “who came from heaven.”

“Moses lifted up the serpent...even so must the Son of man be lifted up:” – Jesus is reminding the Nicodemus, master teacher of Israel, of the very familiar story found in the Old Testament. (Numbers 21:4-9) Sin caused God to punish Israel so Moses was instructed to lift up the brazen serpent to give His people a chance for life – this was God's plan of deliverance. There was no magic in the serpent, but God healed based upon the faith in the look. Shortly, the same was about to happen for the sin of the world! But instead of a brazen snake lifted up, it would be the Son of man! This is God's provision of new life! Jesus had earlier told Nicodemus, “Ye must be

born again!" v. 7, but here you see a second "must." "even so must the Son of man be lifted up:" – this is the work of Christ the obedience of Jesus to His Father. Jesus did His part, now mankind must do their part!

Don't forget, it is Nicodemus who helps to lift down our Savior from that elevated cross! He not only saw Jesus lifted up, he had part in taking Jesus down! How these words must have run through his mind that day!

Please realize, much of John 3 falls into a category that Jesus sometimes proclaimed truth the full significance and application of which could not be fully appreciated and experienced until after He had risen from the dead.

"That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." – This belief is not a mental agreement to Christ's existence and life but putting one's trust and confidence in Him, that He alone can save. Now one's lives with God in charge of their life, trusting His words and plan!

"eternal life" – Here is the first of ten times "eternal life" is used in the book of John. It is the same Greek word translated "everlasting life" 8 times. The thought is not just life forever---ever person born has life forever--- this is all about the quality of life with God! Rom. 8:19-23; Phil. 3:20-21

III. John's Commentary on the Gospel?

"¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son (Lit. - one and only Son), that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world (Gk – "kosmos" – the entire world); but that the world through him might be saved. ¹⁸ He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, that light (lit. – "the light") is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd (exposed). ²¹ But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God." John 3:16-21

Are these words from Jesus' lips or John's pen? – This is an interesting point mentioned in several of my study books. Most mentioned it but quickly moved on and did not develop much further thought or supporting facts one way or the other. I had never heard this before, but honestly have considered the wording of Jesus strange in this passage. I felt the theory of John 3:16-21 as being from the pen of John rather than the lips of Jesus something that could be possible.

- John the Apostle and the writer of Hebrews are the only writers who used "only begotten son." (Gk - "one and only") 2x – in this passage; John 1:18; I John 4:9 – Heb. 11:17
- Jesus most often will refer to God as "Father."
- More than any other Gospel writer, John will add commentary and insights into the event or discourse being described. (Paul does something similar, he liked to break into praise or testimony to God's greatness!) But don't forget this is all inspired and Holy Spirit given!
- Compared to other passages found in John's five New Testament books, John 3:16-21 sound very similar! -the discussion on "light vs. darkness" John 1:4-9; I John 1:5; 2:8 "born of God/born again" - John 1:12-13; I John 2:29; 3:1, 9; 4:7,10; 5:1; 4-5; 13; 18-21

The idea that John 3:16 and the following verses were not spoken by Jesus almost seems heretical! But remember red letter editions of the Bible are done by studied editors and scholars—who are men. Lastly, I liked the summary on the matter written by Warren Wiersbe, “There were no quotation marks in early manuscripts, but since all Scripture is inspired, it really makes little difference who said the words.” p. 239

Main Components of these Verses: v. 16-21

“For God so loved the world,” – v. 16 Pharisees believed and taught that God hated sinners and delighted in their death! They felt that He only loved Jews and those proselytes that followed their beliefs. Here that idea is destroyed with truth! This intense love for sinners was demonstrated by the greatest gift – God’s one and only Son! The grace of God saves sinners, but **love** set it all in motion! In I John 2:15-17, John will tell believers not to love the world but isn’t it wonderful that God did love the sinners of the world! His gift of His only begotten son is our only hope! John 4:42; I John 2:2; 4:14

“perish” “condemned” “condemnation” – v. 16, 18, 19 All these words are found in the thought of eternal punishment – hell – separation from God and torment or judging and finding one guilty. Realize, the unbeliever already sits judged guilty and on their way to eternal punishment. Jesus is teaching doctrine to a Jewish Doctor of Religion! They believed that the Messiah would come as a ruler and judge, but Jesus is revealing the Messiah came the first time to save sinners from perishing! John 12:44-50 Later, He would return to judge the world!

“believeth in him” “believeth on him” – v. 15, 16, 18 This is a complete trust and commitment to Christ – a change in heart and obedience. Just as the Israelites looked to the brazen serpent in faith and were healed so Jesus was calling Nicodemus to believe in Him as Messiah, Savior of the world by faith. John 1:12; Gal. 3:26

“everlasting life” “saved” “not condemned” – v. 16, 17, 18 These words all speak of our eternal existence with God. Through Christ we are saved from the penalty of our sin and can live with God for eternity! Rom. 5:12-21

“light” “darkness” – v. 19, 20, 21 “**light**” – refers to truth and righteousness – this is why Christ can call Himself Light. In these verses, “light” is referring to truth and righteousness. “**darkness**” – is the normal of the world – the Devil’s lies, and evil that the world full of sinners love.

John loved to use the contrast of the light and darkness to illustrate the condition of the God’s truth verses the world. Of course, John learned this from Jesus Himself! John 12:35-36; I John 2:8-10

“evil deeds” “doeth evil” - v. 19, 20 “**evil deeds**” – is simply wicked and worthless activities “**doeth evil**” – one who knows what he is doing is wrong yet passes on and does it anyway! (Prov. 22:3; 27:12) This is a very sad state, but one we see often in the lives of unbelievers. A lover of darkness practices his evil, worthless deeds and shuns the light out of fear of exposure, shame, and conviction. Job 24:13; Eph 5:13

“doeth truth” “wrought in God” – v. 21 “**truth**” righteousness and a desire for it! “**wrought in God**” – work of God; accomplished by God; done by God These people are willing to know righteousness and have their deeds exposed before God. They have a hope to please God with their lives, but this is only done by His power. Psalm 26; John 15:4-5; I Cor. 15:10

Believer’s Application:

1. Have you come to the Light and believed? The key is belief/faith. It is not “turning over a new leaf” or a “self-help” decision!
 - A personal act No one can do it for you – parents, spouse, friend – every individual is responsible before God.
 - A trust and commitment to the work of God. John 12:50; Rom. 5:6-12; John 1:12-13
 - A specific time Rom. 13:11; 2 Cor. 6:2
 - A beginning of change New creature – 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24
 - A supernatural event work of God 1 Peter 1:23; John 1:12-13
2. Are your “deeds wrought in God.?” Are you living in the deeds of darkness or that of God? Is God working in you? Are you in darkness or light? Sincerely ask God to lead you to light, and He will! Numerous Bible characters desired truth and God sent it.

Spiritually, when Dr. Nicodemus left Jesus that night, he still had a long journey to travel before he was a believer in Christ as Messiah. That night Jesus certainly gave him much to further consider and study in the Scriptures. It will take Nicodemus a while to break with his religious system. He will try to reason with it, reform it, and inform it, but finally Nicodemus will realize it was full of darkness and error! One afternoon, he will get up from his seat among the elite of Israel and go out to a hill where criminals were hung to die. There Nicodemus will see the One lifted up, he will become **part** of the gospel story demonstrating his newfound faith when he buries His Savior, Jesus the Savior of the world!