

JOHN CHAPTER 3

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

This is perhaps the most important chapter in John's Gospel, because it deals with the subject of the new birth. Some religious groups have so confused this subject that many average church members, let alone religious leaders *like Nicodemus*, have no idea what it means to be *born again*.

I. **The Necessity for the New Birth** (3:1–5) 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 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."* 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 into the kingdom of God.*

A. New birth is necessary to experience the kingdom of God (v. 3). Nicodemus was a moral, religious man, one of the chief teachers (*rulers*) of the Jews, yet he did not understand the truth about the new birth. Spiritual truths cannot be grasped by the carnal mind of sinful man (see 1 Corinthians 2:10–14). Nicodemus came "*by night*" (a symbol of the unsaved man). He is "*in the dark*" spiritually (see Ephesians 4:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:3–6). Being religious and moral does not make a man fit for heaven; he must be born again, that is, *born from above*.

Nicodemus confused the spiritual and the physical (see v. 4). He thought in terms of physical birth, while Christ was talking about a spiritual birth. All of us are *born in sin*. Our "*first birth*" makes us children of Adam, which means we are children of wrath and of disobedience (Ephesians 2:1–3). No amount of education, religion, or discipline can change the old nature (the *old self*; the *old man*; the *sinful nature*)—we must receive a *new nature* from God.

B. New birth is necessary to enter the kingdom of God (v. 5). In using the term, "*the kingdom of God*," Jesus did not mean an earthly political kingdom (see Romans 14:17). When sinners trust Christ, they become *citizens of God's kingdom* and *members of God's family*. Like most of his Jewish friends, Nicodemus thought that being born a Jew and doing their best to live according to the Law would satisfy God

(see Matthew 3:7–12; John 8:33–39). Ever since Adam’s sin in the “garden” (Genesis 3), every person has been born in sin and separated from God. Only by being *born again* can anyone enter the kingdom of God.

II. **The Nature of the New Birth** (3:6–13) ⁶ “That which has been born of the flesh is flesh, and that which has been 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 do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who has been born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ 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 bear witness of what we have seen, and you do not accept our witness. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

A. The new birth is a spiritual birth (vv. 6–7). That which is born of the flesh (the old nature) is flesh, always will be flesh, and is under the wrath of God. That which is born of the Spirit, receiving the new nature, (see 2 Peter 1:4) is Spirit and is eternal. You cannot produce a spiritual birth with physical means. This is why “*born of water*” in v. 5 cannot mean literal water, for then *baptism* would mean applying a physical substance (water) to the physical being. This action could never bring about a spiritual birth (Read again John 1:11–13 and 6:63). “Born of water” does not refer to water baptism, for in the Bible, baptism speaks of death, not birth (Romans 6:1ff). If baptism is essential for salvation, then nobody in the OT was ever saved, for there was no baptism under the Law.

The great saints named in Hebrews 11 were all saved by faith. Salvation is not of works (Ephesians 2:8–10), and water baptism is a human work. Christ came to save, yet He did not baptize (John 4:2). If baptism is necessary for eternal life, why would Paul rejoice because he had not baptized more people? (see 1 Corinthians 1:13–17)

The new birth can only be produced by spiritual means. What are these means? The Spirit of God (John 3:6 and 6:63), and the Word of God (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18). The “water” in v. 5 refers to physical birth (every baby is “born of water”), which is what Nicodemus was referencing in v. 4.

A person is *born again* when the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to produce faith and impart the new nature when the person believes, is saved, is converted. The

Spirit usually uses a believer to witness the Word to another person (see 1 Corinthians 4:15), but only the Spirit can impart life.

B. It is a mysterious birth (vv. 8–10). No one can explain the wind, and no one can explain the working of the Spirit—both the Spirit and the believer are like the wind. Nicodemus, instructed in the Law, should have known the truth of the renewing work of the Spirit (see Ezekiel 37).

C. It is a real birth (vv. 11–13). Many things are mysterious—yet are still real. Jesus assures Nicodemus that the new birth is not a fantasy, it is a reality. If a person will but believe Christ’s words, receive Him, and confess His personal “lordship,” he or she will discover how real and wonderful the new birth is.

III. The Basis for the New Birth (3:14–21) ¹⁴ *“And 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. 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. ¹⁹ And 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 lest his deeds be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been done by God.”*

A. Christ had to die (vv. 14–17). Christ again refers Nicodemus to the Old Testament—this time to Numbers 21, the account of the brazen serpent. The serpents were biting the Jews and killing them, and the strange solution to the problem was found when God instructed Moses to make and erect a serpent of brass in the camp! Looking at the serpent in faith brought healing. In like manner, since sin is killing us, Christ was made sin for us. If we look to Christ by faith, we are saved. Brass symbolizes judgment, and Christ experienced our judgment when He was lifted up on the cross. Christ had to die before men could be born again; His death brings life. What a paradox!

B. Sinners have to believe (vv. 18–21). Faith in Christ is the only means of salvation. God’s command to Moses in Numbers 21 was not that he kill the snakes, make a salve for the wounds, or try to protect the Jews from being bitten. It was that

he lifts up the brazen serpent and tell men to look by faith. The verb *lifted up* has a dual meaning: to be crucified (John 8:28; 12:32–34) and to be glorified and exalted.

In his Gospel, John points out that our Lord's crucifixion was actually the means of His glorification (John 12:23ff). The cross was not the end of His glory; it was the means of His glory (Acts 2:33). Much as the serpent was *lifted up* on that pole, so the Son of God would be *lifted up* on a cross. Why? To save us from sin and death.

In the camp of Israel, God's solution to the "*serpent problem*" was not in killing the serpents, making medicine to cure the bite, trying to avoid the serpents, passing anti-serpent laws, or climbing the pole. The answer was looking by faith at the uplifted serpent. The whole world has been bitten by sin, and "*the wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23). God sent His Son to die, not only for Israel, but for a whole world.

So, how is a person born from above? How are people saved from eternal perishing? By believing in Jesus Christ; by *looking to Him* in faith. Not looking means condemnation; looking in faith means salvation.

John refers back to 1:4–13, the symbolism of light and life, darkness and death. Sinners not only live in darkness, but they love the darkness and refuse to come to the light where their sins will be exposed, confessed, and forgiven.

IV. The Confusion about the New Birth (3:22–36) ²² *After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.* ²³ *And 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.* ²⁵ *Therefore there arose a debate between John's disciples and 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 borne witness, 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.* ³¹ *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 bears witness; and no one receives His witness.* ³³ *He who has received His witness 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.”

“There arose a question between some of John’s disciples and a Jew concerning ceremonial purification.” Could this Jew have been Nicodemus, still searching after truth?

Like many people today, Nicodemus was confused about baptism and religious ceremonies. Perhaps he thought “*born of water*” meant baptism or some Jewish purification rite. However, John the Baptist pointed this Jew to Christ. If baptism were necessary for salvation, then this is the place for the Bible to say so; but nothing is said. Instead, the emphasis is on *believing* (v. 36).

It is evident that Nicodemus came “out of the dark” and finally became a born-again Christian. Here in John 3, we see Nicodemus in the darkness of confusion; in John 7:45–53, we see him in the dawn of conviction, willing to give Christ a fair hearing; and in John 19:38–42, we see Nicodemus in the daylight of confession, openly identifying himself with Christ in His death.¹

Without a positive decision of believing Jesus, the Son of God, humans do not stand a chance of comprehending or experiencing eternal life and continue to be under the anger or condemnation of God.

The anger or wrath of God is the way the Bible expresses God’s intolerance of evil or sin (cf. Romans 1:18). The kingdom of God will not tolerate within it any form of sin (cf. Revelation 21:7–8, 27; 22:15). Sin must be forgiven or a sinner has no chance of entering God’s domain of heaven. Although many like to think that we are in a satisfactory relationship with God unless we do something “very” wrong, the Bible declares differently. People without a relationship to Christ are by their basic nature and actions oriented actively to sinfulness. Something radical is needed to reverse the sinful condition of humanity. The means God has provided to overcome the existing state of condemnation is for people to believe (place their faith) in the Son. Failure to do so is *not* to become condemned; it is to *continue* in condemnation.²

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). [*Wiersbe’s expository outlines on the New Testament*](#) (pp. 217–220). Victor Books.

² Borchert, G. L. (1996). [*John 1–11*](#) (Vol. 25A, p. 195). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1. In what does the world try to find salvation today?**
- 2. Read verses 1–21. What is your impression of Nicodemus?**
- 3. Why did Jesus treat Nicodemus like a religious illiterate?**
- 4. What does Jesus' self-confidence with another great rabbi suggest about His understanding of who He was?**
- 5. Jesus used four illustrations to explain salvation to Nicodemus: birth, wind, the serpent on a pole, light, and darkness. What does each illustration contribute to your understanding of salvation?**
- 6. Which of these illustrations is most helpful to you? Why?**
- 7. Which illustration, if any of them, is hard for you to grasp? Why?**
- 8. Read Numbers 21:4–9. Why did Jesus choose this illustration to teach Nicodemus more about salvation?**

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