
John 3:1-15 *Being Born Again!*

Into Thy Word Ministries Bible Study www.intothyword.org

General Idea: Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, came to Jesus with questions. As he complemented Jesus and acknowledged His miracles, wisdom, and that He was from God, Jesus challenged him. He told him that he must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God! This perplexed *Nicodemus*; “How can I do that?” he said, thinking he had to climb back into his mother’s womb. But Jesus said, “It is true you have to be born again—not out of your mom but rather out of your will and into God’s. You must be born from God anew; if not, you can’t see the Kingdom for understanding spiritual things or encounters. Just as a woman gives life to her baby, God gives life to His children so we are born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus still did not understand. Jesus asked him; “why, as a teacher of the faith, do you not understand? Why, after all that you have heard and seen, do you not believe?” Jesus told Him of His coming sacrifice and how He would be lifted up, just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake, to pay for the sins of humanity, and that those who believed in Him would have eternal life.

Contexts and Background:

This text contains the key catchphrase of what it means to be a Christian. Also here, John begins a series of discourses on Jesus’ teaching, which usually centers on a question someone asks Him. He turns the resulting misunderstanding around into not only deep instruction, but also deep conviction. Jesus’ teaching discourses are similar to that of the great philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but Jesus emphasized what matters most to the soul and eternity that is also reflected in how we are to God and others.

Commentary—Word and Phrase Meanings:

- *Pharisees.* If ever there was a group in church history that could be called “religious fanatics,” it was the Pharisees. They were a very select group, numbering from just a few to as many as 6,000. They would make solemn vows in public and devote every moment of their entire lives to obeying the Law of God as a way of pleasing God. They seemed to have sincere hearts, seeking to follow God, but, for the most part, it was all just a show and legalism. So, the average Jew on the street was blinded from freely worshipping and seeking his God. Instead, there were hundreds of laws to follow. These were the rules that they used to confront Jesus.
- *Nicodemus.* He was perhaps a wealthy, highly educated, and important religious and perhaps civil leader too. He had to keep his reputation and appease his supporters and colleagues. He may have had an inner feeling that his thinking was not enough—perhaps even pretentious—and wanted something deeper and more meaningful and Jesus seemed to have all the answers. His dilemma was how to get to know Him without alienating his community (John 19:39-40).
- *Jewish ruling council.* They were the best and brightest of their day. There were 70 members and were responsible for the instruction and continuance of the Law of Moses. However, they were all about their ethnicity and heritage; they twisted God’s law and decrees into such legalism that it was blinding to those who wanted to see the One True God, a loving and caring Redeemer. One can’t have a relationship with rules; Jesus cut this down by showing that the Law and Prophets pointed to Him as the fulfillment. Jesus turned their religion from *born of man* to *born of God*. This truth would have made these people obsolete, so they were fighting for their right to exist. In a few years (70 A. D.), they would mostly cease to exist anyway (John 4:7-26; 7:50-51; Acts 5:34-39; 22:3).

- *At/by night.* Meaning concealing one's actions because of a fear of being seen. He intruded during a private time, yet Jesus did not send him away as most Rabbis would have then; rather, He challenged him to the very depth of his soul. Normally, this would have indicated sin and the cover up of it; however, in this case Nicodemus was not sinning; he was perhaps evading his colleagues because of fear or because he had respect for Jesus and did not want to ask Him questions that others would use against Him. Since he worked during the day, the night may have been his only option—or was it? Why did he come at night? This would have been very unusual. Perhaps he was too busy and could not leave his priestly post, or maybe he wanted to avoid the crowds or was fearful and did not have the courage to speak up. Perhaps he felt convicted and did not know how to respond or was afraid what the other leaders would think about his talking to someone they thought was uneducated and a rogue. This is also metaphorical, that Nicodemus was living in darkness, where the religion of his faith blinded him to the reality of who God was, and his encounter with Jesus opened him up to the Light. We will see Nicodemus keep on sneaking to see Jesus in the night, curious and conflicted. Then, we will see his faith in action, for sometime prior to Jesus' crucifixion, he believed, and provided the expensive burial ointments (Psalm 119:148; John 3:16-21; 7: 50-51; 8:12; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 19: 39-41).
- *Rabbi.* Meaning teacher; here, Nicodemus was flattering Jesus. Whether or not it was sincere, Jesus cuts him with conviction.
- *Come from God.* Here, the meaning is that the truth told comes from the precepts of God and His Word and not an esoteric philosophy or school or personal thought. Also, the miracles attest to the authenticity of the Teacher that could only come from God. Nicodemus did not understand who Jesus was yet; he was not claiming Jesus was God, but perhaps sent by God. Later, he will see Christ as He is, The Holy One.
- *I tell you the truth.* Nicodemus thought he had the true faith and probably had a hard time thinking his faith needed more than a rework or that he needed to be converted! This does not make sense to someone who is not in Christ. It is like explaining the inside of a building when the person explaining it has not seen it, yet he attempts to explain it to another person who has not seen it either. Jesus sensed in Nicodemus a deep hunger and emptiness.
- *Kingdom of God.* Kingdom means government and God's rule; Christ is our leadership and direction necessary to succeed in building a life, spirituality, and a church. It refers to the exercise of our God's "Lordship," that He is our King. He is sovereign; He is the absolute monarch of the universe. His rule is absolute. When we refuse to be governed and controlled, we will revert in our sinful nature to anarchy and chaos, causing harm to others (Psalm 10:16--18; Dan. 2:44; 4:34; Isa. 9:6-7; Matt 3:1-12; 4:23; 24:14; 28:18-20; Col. 1:13; 28-29; Heb. 1:8-14; Rev. 5:9-10; 19:16).
- *Born again.* It means conversion, being "born from above" or "rebirth"—that God *converts* or "re-births" us, that our old life is old and obsolete, useless, and even detrimental, and it is no longer who we are. This term was also used by the Romans when someone adopted a child and that child's former identify, family, and status were relinquished and his or her new Roman citizenship took over. The Jews used this as a term that referred to a new convert who would sever all ties to any former religion and ethnicity. This also means regeneration; Christ changes us by His act of sending the Holy Spirit to supernaturally renew us. We were dead in sin; now, because of Christ, we can have newness of life. This is paramount because we can't earn or achieve our salvation by any other means besides the work of Christ; without Grace, we cannot be forgiven or move forward in our spiritual life here or gain eternal life. We have been given a new life and new nature, one that is in Christ. Being born again means we are born from above by God. It is the work of the Spirit (John 3:3-6; Rom. 3:9-20; 8:14; 1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 4:6; 5:22-23; 1 Pet. 1: 3-12, 22-2:3; 4: 1-11) because we cannot do it on our own. Everyone is condemned because of sin; no one can ever escape it. No one since Adam and Eve has ever been born right; that is why we have to be *born*

again. All this is a result of Jesus Christ's sacrifice of redemption, His permanence, and His love for us. He lived, died, and rose again for you and me! This is the primary theme for being a real, saved Christian where Jesus Christ is one's Lord and Savior; we are born again because God adopts and changes our nature as in *starting again as new* (Jer. 1:11-12; Ezek. 36:24-27; Micah 1:10-15; John 3; 7:37-39). In Jesus' time, this phrase also referred to Gentiles who converted to Judaism. Now, He switches it to those who will convert to Christ as the new living Hope, inheritance, security, and God. Thus, the question implied is, what are we doing with it now? Our new life must produce results (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:17-20; Jer. 1:11-12; Micah 1:10-15; John 1:12-13; 19:11-13; Rom. 9:7-8; 2 Cor. 5:17-20; 2 Cor. 5:17; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Titus 3:5; James 1:17-18; 3:15-17).

- *Born of water and the Spirit*. Meaning purification, as in a cleansing from the Spirit or a renewal—a contrast from what is flesh and earthly as in human sinful nature, to what is Righteous and Holy, heavenly, God's nature. Our physical birth leads to our death; our spiritual birth leads to eternal life. Nicodemus thought this was literal and ridiculous, because we can't be born a second time physically; but this is metaphorical to show what is happening metaphysically. "Water" here refers to the embryonic fluid released during birth denoting one's first and only physical birth. Water and Spirit are also similarities of God's outpouring of life and His coming Spirit to be poured out on all believers. This does not mean baptism, because the context states this is physical and Christian baptism had not yet been initiated. Baptism would be pointless to Nicodemus, because it means a profession of faith and the ritual to publicly show it. Besides, baptism can't save you; it is only the outer showing of our salvation as a testimony and a covenant to others (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:24-27; John 7:37-39).
- *Flesh gives birth to flesh*. Meaning flesh makes more flesh but can't make spirit; we can only reproduce from what we are and have. Only Christ can give us this gift of new life and salvation.
- *The wind blows/sound of the wind*. Meaning the voice of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 2:7; Ezek. 37; John 20:22).
- *Born of the Spirit*. This is called regeneration—the new birth by the Spirit—implanting of the divine nature by the Word of God, will of God, and Spirit of God through Christ's and the Spirit's work received by our faith (Titus 3:4, Jn.3:5; Rom.10:17; Eph.3:17; 1 Pet.1:23).
- *Israel's teacher/master*. Meaning one who is commissioned to teach God's Law. Yet, Nicodemus was ignorant of basic spiritual principles that are clearly in the Scriptures.
- *You not understand*. A reproof; the imagery Jesus used is from the Old Testament, the sacred essential texts Nicodemus would have known and memorized but apparently did not know the real meaning of, and he should have. Perhaps, because he was so entrenched in his sect's interpretations, he did not take the time to see the texts in their context for himself. People can't understand higher truth when they do not understand simple truths.
- *Earthly things...heavenly things*. The contrast between the Holy God and sinful humanity. One cannot be saved by one's own efforts; only God can save us. This also shows the sovereignty and loving nature of God and the need of our repentance to show we have responded and are saved.
- *Heaven*. Meaning only an eyewitness of Heaven can testify about Heaven. It also means having Divine wisdom and refers to the authority of Christ to instruct and to save, and that He dwells in heaven even though He walked the earth. It also represents Jesus' divine nature (John 6:41-42).

- *Son of Man*. Means the messianic title of Christ and alludes to His identification with humanity. This is Jesus' most common title for Himself. It is used eighty-one times in the Gospels, and it is never used by anyone else but Jesus. It is used many times outside of the Gospels (Dan. 7:13: 8:17; Acts 7:56; Heb. 2:5-11; Rev. 1:13-14; 14:14). It means *He is Lord and King!* It does not mean He is just a man, nor is it His identification of being among humanity, even though He is identified with us. Rather, it is one of His Messianic titles. It is a reference from the book of Daniel (Dan. 7:13-14) as a picture of a heavenly body who in the end times is entrusted by God with full authority, glory, and sovereign power, who is to be worshiped. He will judge the world (Matt. 24:30-26:64). It is also a picture, showing us that Jesus must suffer on our behalf (Isa. 52:13-53:12; Matt. 26:24-64; Mark 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33-34; 14:21, 41), and one of His sovereign Lordship and glory (Rev. 1:13; 14:14). Jesus may have preferred this term to Messiah because most people had a skewed view of who and what a messiah would be. They wanted a military or political leader, not what God had promised and did send—a Savior from our sin (Matt. 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; Mark 2:10, 28; Luke 5:24; 6:22; John 9:35; 12:23; Rom. 6:4; Heb. 2:6; Rev. 14:14).
- *Moses...snake in the desert*. The Israelites were rebelling and complaining against Moses and God, so God sent poisonous snakes to punish them. Then, God had mercy; He told Moses to make an image of a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole and God would heal the people who looked at it. The image of Moses' snake is the modern medical symbol today, the symbol of healing. Here it references that we must look to Christ and chapter 2 emphasizes the same (Num. 21:4-9; John 8:28; 12:32-34; Acts 4:27-28).
- *Must be lifted up*. A wordplay that alludes to the cross. Just as the image of the snake was lifted, Christ will also be the payment for redemption by His sacrifice, the resurrection that makes atonement for us. This is the main point to God's plan after the fall of humanity. All of the Old Testament prophecy leads up to this—God's eternal plan to redeem and save us (John 12:32-33).

Devotional Thoughts and Applications:

Being born again is our eternal rebirth and beginning of our new spiritual and effectual lives. It is all about the work of God in us, His work that comes into our being. It can't come from us or be produced from our works or thinking. It is not about "me" or what I have done or can do; it solely rests on His Person and His Work, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ filling us. It is mysterious and undeserved. It is hard to explain to or be examined by a person who is saved and impossible to fathom to a person who does not know Christ. It is the depths of what it means to be a Christian as our lives are now with God and all about God. We are new, even though we may look the same on the outside. All is new in our soul on the inside. This is what gives us our new life, our purpose and reason for living and being. It is not just the entrance to the Christian life, it is the Christian life--our intimacy with Christ and dedication to His Sovereignty and Lordship. Our old nature has been swapped out, transfigured for His; our lives have been totally turned around from self-focused to Christ-focused, from carnal to faithful, from prideful to loving, from self-interested to fruitful and obedient. We can't earn our favor with God, but we can run and live our lives for Him through His commands, nurture, and help. This is where not just our life comes from, but also our morality and ethics for decision-making and our righteousness for conformity to His will.

We need to all ask ourselves, *is there a hunger in me for more out of my relationship with Christ? If so, what do I need to do to get there? If not, what is holding me back?*

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. How did you react when you first heard the term *born again*?
2. Why do you suppose many people react negatively to being *born again*? How did Nicodemus react?
3. Why did Nicodemus come at night? Do you think he was curious and conflicted or...?
4. Have you been born again? If so, how? What about being converted out of your will and into God's will?
5. Did you have a hard time thinking your faith needed more than a rework and that you needed to be converted? How about now and growing deeper in the Christian life? What holds you back?
6. How does being born again help Christians understand spiritual things or deepen their encounters with God and others?
7. Do you think that "born again" is a good catchphrase of what it means to be a Christian? If not, what would be better and more palatable to non-Christians? Should it matter?
8. What helps you to seek and understand deep instructions from God's Word and Spirit? What needs to happen for you to have a deep conviction in Jesus Christ as LORD?
9. How does legalism skew the average person from freely worshipping and seeking God? Why can't one have a relationship with rules? Why do we need a Redeemer?
10. Why can't someone understand higher truth when they do not understand simple truths? Has this been so with you?
11. Why must our new lives produce results? How can you produce more products of His Love and Fruit? How can you better reflect how you are to God and others?
12. What needs to happen in your life to challenge you to the very depth of your soul? Do you think you have real faith in action? What can you do to have more? What would your life look like if you did?