

**Exegetical Notes, John 3:1-21**  
**“Jesus Meets Nicodemus”**

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**John 3:1-21**

**Verses 1-2**

*Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*

- Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Pharisees were the party of Jews who believed in the strict keeping of the Law of Moses and the teaching of the Rabbis. He was also a member of the “ruling council,” the Sanhedrin. This means that he was a wealthy and influential person among the Jews.
- But he came to Jesus “at night.” He came to Jesus secretly hoping that he would not be noticed by his fellow Jews.
- He confessed that he knew Jesus to be a “teacher” who had “come from God.” He recognized that Jesus should be considered a rabbi and that God was with Jesus. He did not recognize Jesus as Israel’s Messiah or as the Son of God.
- He claimed that he knew these things because of the signs, miracles, Jesus had done.

**Verse 3**

*Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”*

- Jesus immediately introduces confusion into the discussion. Instead of greeting Nicodemus in the traditional and acceptable way, Jesus says to Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is “born again.”
- The word used by Jesus translated “again” can also be correctly translated as “from above.” Jesus means to introduce both ideas into the discussion with Nicodemus. To enter the Kingdom of God one must be reborn by the grace of God.

- Jesus introduces this concept because it is crucial for Nicodemus to understand this if he would be part of the Kingdom of God. Clearly, Jesus knows why Nicodemus has come to him even more clearly than does Nicodemus.

#### **Verse 4**

***“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”***

- Nicodemus shows his confusion at Jesus’ remarks. Basically, he tells Jesus that he does not understand how it is possible for a person to be born a second time.
- His confession of confusion gives Jesus the opportunity to explain.

#### **Verses 5-8**

***Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”***

- Jesus explained to Nicodemus the great spiritual truth behind the simple concept of being born again from above.
- First, Jesus said one must be born of “water.” This word has caused a great deal of concern for scholars. Some say it is a reference to baptism and means that baptism is required for rebirth. However, that belief is not supported by the New Testament as a whole. Others argue that it means the repentance from sin which must come with truly meaningful baptism and conversion. Still others argue that the issue is translational and that the phrase should be read, “by water, even the Spirit,” thus making water synonymous with Spirit. Others argue that it is a reference to the amniotic fluid released at physical birth, meaning that you can’t be born again until you are first physically born.
- Second, Jesus said that this birth was “of the Spirit.” Clearly, whatever you take the first word to mean, the second makes it clear that the act of rebirth is not of your own doing. It is a spiritual event over which you are not in control. This was made clear when Jesus said that “flesh gives birth to flesh,” the first birth is of the flesh, and “Spirit gives birth to Spirit,” the second birth is of God.

- Third, Jesus told Nicodemus that the concept of spiritual rebirth should not be surprising or unknown to him. Jesus says that the “wind blows where it will and you cannot see it even though you can hear its sound.” He says that the same thing is true with the Spirit. In Greek, the word for wind is “pneuma” which is also the word for spirit. By introducing the word “pneuma,” into the conversation, Jesus increases Nicodemus’ confusion.

### Verse 9

*“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.*

- Nicodemus is totally lost. He has no idea what Jesus means.

### Verses 10-21

*“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*

*<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

*<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*

- Jesus then lays out the great eternal truth to Nicodemus. He starts by telling Nicodemus that this truth should be obvious to all of Israel’s teachers, but it will not be. Jesus tells Nicodemus that Israel’s leaders will reject the truth about Jesus and will reject Jesus himself. Jesus claims that this will be so because they do not think about things from a spiritual perspective.
- In verse 13, Jesus tells Nicodemus that his view of things is expressly spiritual in nature for he is the only one who has come down from heaven from the Father for the purpose of putting things in their proper spiritual order. Others have ascended into heaven as Jesus will, but no other person

was sent from the Father as was Jesus. It is the being sent from in order to return to, that makes Jesus different from all others. It is the fact that Jesus' origin is from heaven which perfects his spiritual understanding.

- Jesus then tells Nicodemus that he will be “lifted up,” crucified, a symbol to the people just as was Moses' staff. As those who looked on Moses' staff were saved (see Numbers 21:5-9), so those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life.
- Jesus then explained the Gospel to Nicodemus. God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus, his special son, the one sent from heaven who will return to heaven, that whosoever believes may have eternal life as a gift from the Father. Jesus explained that God's desire is not to condemn but to save the world. He who accepts Jesus, believes in him, will not be condemned, but those who deny Jesus will be condemned because they have rejected the plan of the Father.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Jesus Meets Nicodemus*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)