

JESUS AND NICODEMUS

John 2:23 - 3:21

*“Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the LORD,
“Though your sins are as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18).*

It has been observed with some degree of accuracy that Christians are a strange breed. We talk about being born again, even though we reject reincarnation. We talk out loud to a Person we cannot see. We commit our entire future to One we have never met because of a book we believe He wrote, even though we did not see Him do it. We say we are followers of Christ, but sometimes we act like the devil. We claim to be citizens of heaven, but we walk around on earth.

What is a Christian? From the above description, we would suppose that he is a contradiction in terms and a walking paradox. Ask most people the question, “What is a Christian?” and you will be astonished at the wide variety of answers you receive.

- It is someone who follows the teachings of Jesus.
- It is a person who goes to church.
- It is one who tries to be good.
- It is someone who has religion or spirituality -- whatever that is.

I know of no better passage in the Bible that defines what is a Christian than the third chapter of John. It has been heralded as the chapter of the gospel of God. There have probably been more sermons preached from this chapter than any other single chapter of the Bible.

What I find fascinating about such an observation is that this is not one of the great sermons of Jesus. This is not an oration delivered before thousands. It is not an elaborate coast-to-coast televangelism production. Instead, it is a simple conversation between two men. It is a midnight dialogue. We could entitle it, “Tabletalks with Jesus.”

I think there is a lesson here. We get to thinking that significant ministry can only be accomplished when it is done in front of a crowd. Sometimes I think the reverse is true, especially when I look at Jesus. Certainly there were times when He preached in front of multitudes. But, more often, it was these quiet tabletalks that produced the real and lasting fruit. That is what we shall see here.

THE MINISTRY IN JERUSALEM

23 Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing. 24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25).

Jesus had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It was a festive time; a time of remembrance and rejoicing. Worshiping Jewish pilgrims had gathered from all over the world. The celebration would continue for an entire week. It would begin with the Passover on the 14th of Nisan and it would continue for the next seven days in the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

During this time, the news begins to travel throughout Jerusalem about what this young Galilean rabbi has done in the temple; how he has taken a whip and driven the temple franchise businesses from the Court of the Gentiles. Who is this man? Is He a prophet from God? Is He perhaps the promised Messiah? As speculation increases, many of the Jews flock to meet this stranger from Galilee.

1. The Belief of the People: *Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing (2:23).*

There were a large number of people who initially responded to Jesus in a positive manner. This passage tells us that they *believed in His name*. At the same time, we ought to notice something about their faith. This belief was not based upon what Jesus had taught. It was, instead, a faith based on the spectacular miracles that Jesus performed and upon the actions of Jesus in clearing out the temple.

Do you see the implications of this? Their faith was based upon the dramatic and the spectacular. Because of this, it was a shallow faith. When the day came that these miracles would no longer be produced before their eyes, the real test of their faith would be at hand. Jesus did not need to wait until such a test took place. He already knew the extent of their faith.

2. The Distrust of Jesus: *But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man. (2:24-25).*

Verse 23 says that many of the Jews believed on Him. The Greek tense that is used to describe that belief is an aorist tense. It signifies a point in time. They believed in Him.

In verse 24, there is a change of tenses. We read that Jesus was not entrusting Himself to those who had believed. This is described in the imperfect tense. It describes an ongoing state of affairs.

The People	Jesus
They believed in Him (action takes place in a point in time)	He was not entrusting Himself to them (continuing action in the past)

We would probably have rejoiced to have all of these new converts. We would have gone about establishing new churches and launching a membership drive. Jesus did not do any of that.

The People	Jesus
They saw the miracles	He did the miracles
They did not fully realize who Jesus was	He knew what was in man
They believed in His name	He did not entrust Himself to them
They needed someone to bear witness of the truth	He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man

Jesus knew the strength of their faith. They were looking for the spectacular. They fed on the dramatic. They were interested in the temporary and the temporal. And yet, there was an exception. There was a man who was different. His name was Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS COMES TO JESUS

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Him 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." (John 3:1-2).

Most people treat the chapter divisions found in our English Bibles as though they were inspired by God and a part of the original text. In reality, they were not added until many hundreds of years later. I am not opposed to having these chapter and verse divisions. Their presence makes it much more convenient to refer to a specific passage. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that, just because there is a chapter division present, we should regard the text on either side of that chapter division as being separate. Our passage here in

John is an example of such a case.

1. A Man in Contrast: *Now there was a man... (3:1).*

The Greek text does not begin with the word “now.” Instead, it uses the Greek conjunction δε (The phrase reads: Ην δε ανθρωπος). We ought to translated it, “BUT there was a man...” This points to a contrast with the previous verses.

The Jews	Nicodemus
They had a measure of faith	He had a measure of faith
They came in crowds to see Jesus	He came by night to see Jesus
Jesus did not entrust Himself to them	Jesus did entrust Himself to him

Do you see the contrast? Jesus knew all about men. He knew what was in their hearts. He knew that they were not to be trusted. But there was a man who was different. This was a man who could be trusted.

2. A Man in Religion: *Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus (3:1).*

The name Nicodemus was common among Hellenistic Jews and Greeks. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a select denomination. Literally, the name meant “separated ones.” Unlike many Jews of that era, the Pharisees chose to remain separate from Greek philosophy and Greek culture. They did this by holding fast to all of the Jewish traditions. They held, not only to the written Law of Moses, but also to the oral traditions that had grown up around Judaism. This man had a Greek name, but he had chosen to follow a Jewish lifestyle.

The Pharisees were the evangelicals of orthodox Judaism. They held to the authority of the Scriptures. They believed in the supernatural, in angels and in a life after death. We can best understand them when we see them in contrast to the Sadducees.

Pharisees	Sadducees
Name means “separated ones”	Name means “righteous ones”
Held to the authority of all of the Old Testament Scriptures as well as of the oral law	Viewed the Torah as having greater authority
Believed in miracles, angels & immortality	Rejected the miraculous, angels & immortality

Held to a future resurrection	Denied any resurrection
Popular in the synagogues	Ruled the Temple

It is interesting to note that Jesus almost never disagreed with the doctrinal stance of the Pharisees.

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ³ therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. (Matthew 23:1-3).

Do you see what Jesus says? He says that the Pharisees have the correct teaching; you are to do and observe all they tell you. It is not their teaching that was in error. It was their manner of life that was in error. Their problem was not one of poor doctrine. Their problem was that there was no lifestyle to back up their doctrine.

There is a principle here. It is that you can have the most correct doctrine in the world, you can hold to all five points of Calvinism and even add an extra one for good measure, but if your life is not different, then it is absolutely useless.

3. *A Man in Authority: Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (3:1).*

Nicodemus held a position of authority. His name means “victor over the crowd” and he was indeed a ruler of the Jews. It is likely both from this passage as well as from later references in the Gospel of John that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel.¹ There were seventy members of this distinguished body. To be a member was considered to be one of the highest honors in the land. Nicodemus was a judge in the highest court of Israel.

Nicodemus is only mentioned by name within the Gospel of John (3:1-21; 7:50-52; 19:39). These passages give us the progression of a man who began as a searcher and then a follower and finally a disciple.

4. *A Man by Night: This man came to Him by night (3:1).*

¹ John 7:50 describes Nicodemus as one of the group known collectively as “the chief priests and Pharisees in a context that indicates this group governed the religious affairs in Jerusalem.

A lot has been made of the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus during the night. Some commentaries have suggested that this was because he was afraid or ashamed to be seen with Jesus in the daytime. I do not think this to be the case. Later on, Nicodemus will not be afraid to speak out in defense of Jesus (John 7:50-52). There are many other reasons he might have had for coming by night. Perhaps he was too busy in the daytime. Or maybe he wanted to talk to Jesus at a time when there would be no interruptions.

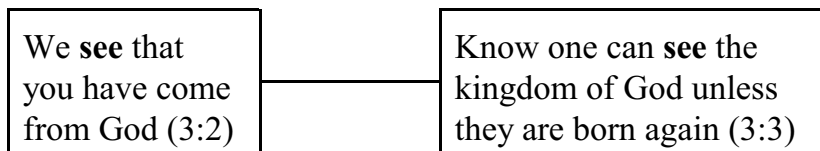
We can imagine this prominent Pharisee making his way out of Jerusalem after the evening prayers. He makes his way to the place where Jesus is staying, whether it is a tent outside the city walls or perhaps with friends in one of the nearby villages.

5. A Man of Respect: *This man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi..." (3:2).*

The term "Rabbi" is a Hebrew one. It is taken from the Hebrew word *rab*, meaning "great one." Rabbi is more formal. It means, "My great one." It was an official term used to describe a teacher of a high office. An English equivalent would be "Doctor" or "your Honor." It was a title of high respect.

6. A Man Convinced: *"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" (3:1).*

There will be a play on words between what is said by Nicodemus versus how Jesus answers him. When Nicodemus says, "We know that you have come from God," the word for "know" is οἶδα. It is regularly used for "know" or "understand," but the literal meaning is to "see." We use a similar expression in English when we say, "I see what this expression means."



Notice that Nicodemus is speaking in the plural. He says, "We know that you have come from God..." It seems as though he is representing others who are of his same mind. Perhaps he is even here officially representing the Sanhedrin.

He begins by affirming that he and those whom he represents know that Jesus is a teacher from God. The reason they know this is because of the signs. It is possible that some of the critics of Jesus had tried to explain away the first few miracles of Jesus.

- “It was just a case of mass hysteria.”
- “Those people only imagined they saw a miracle.”
- “That blind man only thinks he can see.”

As time went on, these critics faced a problem. Jesus had not limited himself to only one or two miracles. He had performed many miracles. As Nicodemus comes to meet with Him, He is still performing them. He has continued to perform miracle after miracle until even the most hardened skeptic has been forced to admit there is a special power here at work.

Nicodemus recognized that there was a power here and that it was from God. What he had not yet recognized was his own need.

The founder of every great religion in the world was primarily a teacher. The one exception to this rule is Jesus. He was primarily a Savior. If you see Him only as a teacher, you have not seen Him for who He is.

A NEW BIRTH

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? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?”

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. 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 the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:3-8).

Nicodemus had begun this interview by paying a compliment to Jesus. I want you to notice what Jesus is going to say and also what He is not going to say. He will not say, “Thank you for calling me a rabbi. That is a very impressive title coming from one who is as high up the educational ladder as you are.” He will not say, “You have been very observant if you have already recognized that I have come from God.” He will not say, “You have seen some of my miracles? Tell me, which one impressed you the most?”

Instead of talking about any of the things Nicodemus had just mentioned, Jesus changes the subject. He does not beat around the bush. He does not talk about the weather or about Nicodemus’ career or his church life or any other side issues. He comes right to the point.

1. A Vital Emphasis: *Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you (3:3).*

The Greek reads, “Ἀμην, αμην, λεγοι σοι.” The word is αμην a transliteration from the Hebrew. It has the same connotation of the English word “truly.” The fact that it is used twice is meant to emphasize the truth of what is about to be spoken. It is as if Jesus is saying, “Don’t miss this, Nicodemus!”

There is nothing more important in your life than your standing and relationship before God. It is a matter of life or death. Indeed, it is a matter of eternal life versus eternal death.

One of the ways in which you can tell a real Christian is by the importance he places upon his spiritual life. One who has a spiritual life will necessarily begin to see the importance of cultivating that life. You can ask a person, “Are you a Christian?” and if they become annoyed at the question, then it is more than likely that they are not, no matter what they say or think.

2. A Special Birth: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (3:3).*

The Greek text of this verse can be understood in one of two ways. It is an example of a homonym. There is a word here that has two possible meanings. Usually, you can tell a homonym from the context, but in this case, either meaning makes sense. The phrase “born again” can mean one of two things:

There is a play on words as Nicodemus says to Jesus, “We **know** (οἶδα – *oída*) that you have come from God...” and Jesus replies, “Unless one is born again he cannot **see** (ὁραω – *horao*) the kingdom of God.”

- Born again.
- Born from above.

Which meaning is intended here? Is Jesus speaking of being born again or is He speaking of being born from above. I am not certain. Either one is doctrinally accurate. Either one fits the context of this verse.

<i>Born Again</i>	<i>Born from Above</i>
The reply of Nicodemus indicates that he assumes Jesus is speaking of a second birth	In verse 31, Jesus speaks of how He who comes from ABOVE is ABOVE all.
Focuses upon the contrast with the physical birth.	Focuses upon the divine origin of our spiritual life.

There is another possibility. It is that this is worded in such a way that we are to

understand both being in view. There are times when we speak in such a way as to intentionally give a double meaning to our words.

People today hear the term “new birth” and think it is speaking of a narrow segment within Christianity. You hear people say, “I am a Christian, but I am not one of those born-again Christians.” The truth we see here is that there is no Christianity apart from the new birth.

3. A Kingdom Need: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (3:3).*

Something that is often missed when people read this passage is its kingdom emphasis. This is a subject that would have been relevant to Nicodemus. He knew all about the kingdom. He was a ruler of the Jews and, as such, he would have been well acquainted with the Jewish Scriptures. He was familiar with all of the prophecies regarding the kingdom. He knew that the kingdom would come at a time when the Messiah was revealed and that He would begin His kingdom in Jerusalem and that it would extend to the whole world.

John the Baptist had come on the scene, announcing that the kingdom was at hand and that it was about to be manifested. He had urged people to repent and to be baptized, bringing forth a changed life as evidence of that repentance as they made themselves ready to meet their King.

Now Jesus is saying something new. He is saying that it is not enough to repent. It is not enough to be outwardly prepared. It is not enough to be baptized by John. Something else is needed. That something is a different sort of birth. A new birth. A birth from above.

4. A Natural Misunderstanding: *Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?” (3:4).*

Nicodemus misses the point entirely. He does not realize that Jesus is speaking of a spiritual birth. He thinks only in physical terms. He interprets the words of Jesus with a rigid literalism. There are a lot of people who do the same thing today. They look at the prophecies of the Bible and they see tanks and helicopters and nuclear missiles and credit cards. By trying to grind physical and overly literal fulfillments, they miss the spiritual truths that are so plainly taught.

When we look at Nicodemus, we see a religious leader, a man of wealth and intellect and power and influence. He comprises all of the morality of the Pharisees and combines it with an openness and a compassion. Yet with all of his accomplishments,

he has not even come to the starting point of real spiritual life. He is not even a baby. He has not yet been born.

There is a lesson here. If you want to have a relationship with God, you have to start over. You must be completely new. It is not enough to add a few self-improvements. Something radical needs to take place.

5. A Twofold Requirement: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (3:5).*

There have been a number of suggested interpretations to this verse. The question revolves around the identity of the water in verse 5. What does it mean to be “born of water”? Several answers have been put forth.

Water Baptism	Those who hold to a baptismal regeneration point to this verse as indicating that one is saved by the physical act of baptism. The problem is that the Scriptures are clear elsewhere to say that we are saved by grace through faith and apart from any outward ritualism such as circumcision or baptism.
	An alternate view sees the water, not only in a literal sense, but also and primarily as symbolic for the cleansing power that is represented in baptism.
Physical Birth	This view sees Jesus as making a contrast between the physical birth versus the spiritual birth and identifies being “born of water” as a reference to the physical birth. One obvious weakness of this view is that there is no precedence (either Jewish or otherwise) for identifying physical birth with water. Over against this argument is Isaiah 48:1 that speaks of Israel coming from the waters of Judah (the KJV follows the literal Hebrew text).
The Word of God	This view looks to passages such as Ephesians 5:26 (<i>cleansed by the washing of water with the word</i>) and 1 Peter 1:23 (<i>you have been born again... by the word of God</i>) and sees this water as a reference to the Scriptures.

The Holy Spirit	This view translates the word “and” (και) as “even” to say that one is <i>born of water, even the Spirit</i> . This view has the advantage of an Old Testament connection that would have been understandable to Nicodemus (Ezekiel 36:25-27 speaks of how God would sprinkle clean water and give a new heart and a new spirit to His people).
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a. Water Baptism: This view is held by the Roman Catholic Church.

- The reference to water is taken literally.
- There are other passages that also link the ideas of baptism with salvation (Romans 6:3; 1 Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16).
- This would fit the context in that John the Baptist had already been mentioned in the previous chapter.
- This passage need not be understood as baptismal regeneration in that the reference to water baptism can be seen as that which represents the cleansing purification of salvation. Thus it is not the act of baptizing that saves, but rather the purifying salvation that the water represents.
- There are some who see this specifically as a reference to the ministry of John the Baptist and thus see the water representing the repentance that John said was necessary to partake of his baptism (this view was held by A.T. Robertson, Tenney and G. Campbell Morgan).

b. Physical Birth.

There is a clear contrast in the passage between “flesh” versus “spirit” This is seen as a parallel to the mention of “water” and “spirit.”

First Birth	Second Birth
Born initially	Born again
This birth is taken for granted	This birth is necessary for entrance into the kingdom
Born of water	Born of the Spirit
That which is flesh is flesh	That which is Spirit is Spirit

This view sees this same contrast as being carried over into verses 5 and 6 as Jesus further develops the same theme.

Verse 5	Verse 6
Water →	Flesh
Spirit →	Spirit

The problem with such a view is that the Bible never elsewhere describes physical birth in terms of being “born of water” and it is wondered whether Jesus would introduce such a misleading description.

- c. The Word of God: This view has been held by such diverse peoples as Unger, Walvrod and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- It is claimed that the phrase “I say unto thee” can point to the words of Christ being the method by which a person comes to the new birth. The problem is that this phrasing is regularly found in the teachings of Jesus.
 - Other Scriptures refer to the Word of God in terms of water (Ephesians 5:26; 1 Peter 1:23).
 - Water was used in Rabbinic literature as a symbol of the Torah.
 - The problem is that there is nothing in THIS passage that would indicate such a connection.
- d. The Holy Spirit (held by Calvin, Zayne Hodges and Wuest).
- One preposition governs the two nouns “water” and “spirit.” The passage literally says that a person must be “born of water and spirit.” This could indicate that the two are one and the same.
 - The Greek term translated “and” (καί) can carry the force of “even.” We would thus say that you must be born of water, even of the Spirit.
 - Water is used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit elsewhere in the gospel of John (4:14; 7:38-39).
 - The Old Testament spoke of how God would sprinkle clean water on His people and given them His Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-28). This same link is seen in Isaiah 44:3 where God says: *I will pour out water on the thirsty land And streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring.*

Which of these views is correct? They all have some good points to suggest, though there is an obvious problem with that view calling for baptismal regeneration. With that exception, I believe that they all have a valid point insofar as they all point one way or another to the purifying work of God as promised in the Old Testament and described in Ezekiel 36:25-28 in terms of both water and God's Spirit.

I personally believe that the reference of being born of water points to the saving act of purification that comes to us via the cross and which was represented by the water of John's baptism and which today is brought to us through the Scriptures and applied to us by the Holy Spirit, resulting in the new birth.

6. A Spiritual Contrast: *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (3:6).*

Nicodemus has made the mistake of confusing that which is flesh with that which is spiritual by nature. These two are not to be confused. Accordingly, Jesus continues to explain the contrast between the physical birth of which Nicodemus has spoken and the new birth that is of the Spirit. In effect, He says that each gives birth after its own kind. This is not a new concept to Nicodemus. The first chapter of Genesis repeats again and again how things are created to produce after their own kind.

And the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed AFTER THEIR KIND, and trees bearing fruit, with seed in them, AFTER THEIR KIND; and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:12).

And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed AFTER THEIR KIND, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:21).

And God made the beasts of the earth AFTER THEIR KIND, and the cattle AFTER THEIR KIND, and everything that creeps on the ground AFTER ITS KIND; and God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:25).

Even when it came time for Adam and Eve to bear children, we read that this same principle continued to be in effect.

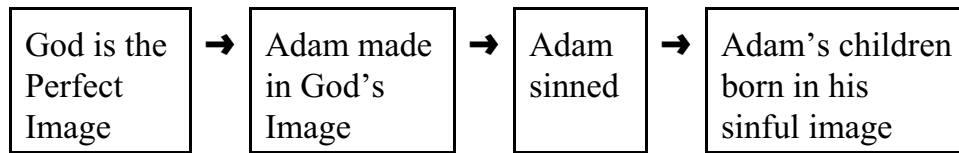
When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth. (Genesis 5:3).

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. They were designed to be like God.

That does not mean God has two arms and two legs or that He is merely a glorified man. It does mean that man has been created to be God's representative on planet earth and that he has been invested with a stewardship over the planet. Man has been given to assume the role of rulership over the world. There is a sense in which he stands in the role of being God to the world.

Furthermore, God is described in the Bible as having personality, emotions, intellect and will. The fact that we share in those might reflect other ways and means in which we are also in the image of God. That pattern was distorted when Adam sinned. Sin affected every part of his life. His personality became self-centered. His emotions became subject to sin. His intellect became clouded. His will fell under the bondage of the flesh.

This same distortion of God's image has been passed on to Adam's descendants. Adam's children were not made in the image and likeness of God. They were born in Adam's own image and likeness. They were polluted by the effects of sin in the same way that Adam reflected this polluted image. His descendants gave rise to a fallen race.



It took the work of a second Adam to restore us to the image and likeness of God. Just as the condemnation had come upon all the world through the sin of a single man, so also through the obedience of a single man has come salvation to all.

⁴⁵ So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual.

⁴⁷ The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. ⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. (1 Corinthians 15:45-49).

The first Adam was given life and became a living soul. The last Adam gave life to the world by laying down His own life. The first Adam sinned by eating of the fruit of the tree. The last Adam obeyed by dying upon the tree. The first Adam brought condemnation and death to all who bore his image and likeness. The last Adam brings justification and life to all who enter into union with Him.

It is through Jesus Christ that man is able to return to the place of a true and even better pattern of the image of God.

7. A Mysterious Example: *The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (3:8).*

Jesus brings out an illustration of the new birth. The reason for this illustration is because Nicodemus is having problems understanding that which he has never seen or experienced. Jesus uses the example of the wind. It is not only a fitting example, but it is also a play on words as the term for “wind” and the term for “spirit” are identical in both Greek and Hebrew. The Greek word is πνευμα.

Why does Jesus use this play on words? I think it is because He wants to make a comparison. He wants to paint a picture of the work of the Spirit and He does this by picturing the work of the wind. Try to look at the wind. You cannot see it. You do not know from where it comes. You do not know where it is going. But you believe it is there. Why? Because you see how it affects the physical world around you. You see the leaves swirl. You see sailboats move across a churning sea. You see these evidences of the wind and they convince you that the wind is at work.

That is what the new birth is like. You cannot see it. You do not know from where it comes. But you can believe it is there when you see how it affects those who have partaken of it.

I have had the opportunity to pilot both a motorboat as well as a sailboat. Piloting a motorboat is easy. You just start the motor and point the boat in the direction you wish to go and you go there. A sailboat is different. It does not carry its own power. It relies on the wind. When the wind blows, the sailboat goes. If the wind does not blow, the sailboat does not move. The pilot’s task is not to generate more wind; it is only to do what is necessary to catch the wind and to be moved by the wind. The spiritual life is like that. We cannot turn it on and off. But we can allow ourselves to be moved by the Spirit when it does blow.

Moses could not produce a burning bush, but when he was confronted by that manifested presence of God, he was able to allow it to change him. How about you? Has the Spirit of God been at work in your life? Are you different today because of the blowing of God’s Spirit in your life? If it is not, then don’t try to fake it. You will be like the little boy who spreads his sails and then blows to make the sound of wind. Don’t settle for cheap sound effects. Spread the sails of your faith and then look for the Lord to move you with His Spirit.

THE EVIDENCE OF A WITNESS

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 that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness. 12 If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man. (John 3:9-13).

At this point, Nicodemus was both confused and a bit exasperated. Instead of finding clarity, he has found more unanswered questions. I can picture him scratching his head and thinking to himself, "I never got any of this in seminary!" At the same time, there is a wonderful attitude that I see at work in Nicodemus. In spite of a lack of understanding, he does not evidence any rejection of the truths Jesus is sharing. He only notes that they are beyond his understanding. This is often the first step to growth.

Can you identify with Nicodemus? Maybe you have heard of the new birth that comes through faith in Christ and it sounds good and you wish that you could partake of it, but it all sounds too complicated. After all, you are not a theologian or a scholar. You don't have a degree in theology. How can you possibly understand? There is good news for you. God is ready to meet you where you are as long as you are willing to be guided to where He is. God will accept you the way you are, but He will not leave you there. He will bring you to the place where He wants you to be.

1. The Teacher is Questioned: *Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" (3:9).*

Notice the use of the definite article with the word "teacher." Nicodemus is not merely one of many teachers. He is known as THE teacher. He must have been considered to be one of the highest teachers in the land.

Jesus asks him, in effect, "Do you mean to tell me that you have a PhD in theology and you do not know what I am talking about?" -- *"Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things (3:10).*

There is a lesson here. Just because a man has a degree in theology does not mean he has an "in" with the Lord. When Jesus was choosing men to be His disciples, He did not go down to the local Bible college or seminary and pick the twelve students with the highest grade point average. Nicodemus had all of the highest degrees from the top universities, but for all of his learning, he was a spiritual baby.

2. The Witness is Given: *Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen (3:11).*

Notice that Jesus is speaking in the plural. He does not say, "I speak that which I know." Instead, He phrases His statement in the plural. He says, *WE speak that which WE know, and bear witness of that which WE have seen.*

Of whom is Jesus speaking? Who is meant by this "WE?" One possibility is that Jesus is referring to Himself and to the other members of the Godhead. While this might be doctrinally correct, it does not really seem to match to context of this discussion with Nicodemus.

I want to suggest that Jesus is referring to Himself and John the Baptist. It has been Jesus and John who have been witnessing to the nation of Israel. Their preaching has gone far beyond the theoretical. Their message is one they have experienced.

There is a sense in which we are included in this group. When we share the gospel with a friend or co-worker, we are sharing that which we have experienced. Our witness is like that of a beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

4. The Witness is Rejected: *We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness (3:11).*

Once again, the pronoun is plural. This is not very clear in our English translation, but it comes across clearly in the Greek text. We could translate it to say:

All of you do not receive our witness.

Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus as the representative of the Jewish leaders. Even at this early stage of His ministry, the Jewish leaders had begun to reject Jesus as well as John the Baptist.

5. The Earthly is Disbelieved: *If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (3:12).*

Everything that Jesus has told Nicodemus up to this point falls under the heading of "earthly things" -- that is, things that take place upon the earth. The new birth is that which takes place on the earth and which deals with people living upon the earth.

On the other hand, there is a whole realm about which Nicodemus has yet to hear. It is the realm of the heavenly things. It is not until you believe the first that you can partake of the second.

6. The Heavenly is Described: *And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man. (3:13).*

Jesus has told Nicodemus earthly things and has been met with astounded unbelief. He would like to go on to tell him of heavenly things. Perhaps Nicodemus wonders how Jesus could tell him of heavenly things. The answer is given here.

It is because Jesus has been there. He is an eye witness. He is the only eye witness. No one else can authoritatively tell Nicodemus what heaven is like. Only Jesus can do that.²

Nicodemus has expressed doubt when he asked the question, “How can these things be?” He has indicated doubt as to the truthfulness of the teachings of Jesus about the new birth. How can Jesus know of such things? Jesus has responded with the evidence of an eye witness. But there is something more. Jesus is more than just a witness from heaven. He has come on a mission of much greater importance than to only be a witness. That mission is now revealed.

WHY JESUS CAME

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life. (John 3:14-15).

Up to now, Nicodemus has been confused. Now Jesus says something that he can begin to understand. He gives an illustration from the Old Testament. He refers to a familiar incident that had taken place over a thousand years earlier.

It is an incident that goes back to the birth of the nation of Israel; back to the days of its exodus from Egypt. Moses had led the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt. The multitude had been traveling slowly through the Sinai desert. During this time, God provided for their food and water in a miraculous way. He brought forth a stream of water in the desert to quench their thirst. Each day He brought forth manna on the ground to satisfy their hunger.

In time, the people began to murmur and complain. They grew tired of the monotonous taste of the manna and they grumbled against the Lord. In His anger, He sent forth “fiery serpents” among the people.

⁵ And the people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water,

² Jesus is not denying such passages in the Old Testament like those that speak of Elijah being caught up to heaven. The point is that someone has to have come down from heaven if he is going to speak authoritatively of what is in heaven.

and we loathe this miserable food."

6 And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

7 So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live." 9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:5-9).

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be in the camp of the Israelites, suffering from deadly snakebite and feeling the poison beginning to work its way through your nervous system? Suddenly, someone runs by your tent.

“Moses has told us that the Lord has provided a way of treatment.”

“What must I do?”

“You have to go out into the middle of the camp and look at the bronze image that sits on the pole.”

“An image! What does the image represent?”

“It is the image of a bronze snake!”

“Oh, no! Not another snake!”

I cannot help but to wonder how many within the camp of Israel died that day because they refused to go out and to look at that image that had been lifted up on their behalf.

Nicodemus was familiar with this story. Jesus does not have to go into further detail. What he does now is to draw a point of comparison between the story and Himself.

The Serpent	Jesus Christ
The people of Israel had spoken against God and Moses.	All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
God sent fiery serpents that bit the people.	Sin threatens to bring on the judgment of God.
Many people died from having been bitten.	The wages of sin is death.
A bronze serpent in the likeness of those that had bitten the people was prepared by Moses.	A body was prepared for Jesus in the likeness of sinful flesh, yet without sin.

The serpent was lifted on a standard.	Jesus was lifted up on the cross.
Anyone who had been bitten could look on this bronze serpent and be healed.	Anyone may believe in Jesus Christ and receive pardon and life from God.

What did the serpent represent? The people were suffering from a serpent problem. They had been bitted and they had been poisoned and they were in danger of suffering death. Of what is the serpent a picture? It is a picture of Satan. It was snakes that had become the problem. They represented poison. They represented death.

Here is the point of the illustration. Jesus was treated upon the cross as though he were Satan—He suffered the wrath that would have deservedly been given to Satan. He became a recipient of the wrath of God that we might receive the love of God. The serpent had been lifted up on the standard so that those who looked upon it could be healed. In the same way, Jesus went to the cross and was lifted up so that whoever believes will have eternal life. When you come to Jesus, you have to take Him the way a poisoned man takes an antidote. This means believing in Him is more than a mere intellectual exercise. It is a recognition of the fact that without Him you are lost and dead.

THE LOVE AND THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should 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 should 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. (John 3:16-18).

We have just seen that it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up. This brings us to a question. What is the source of this necessity? Why must the Son of Man be lifted up? Why must Jesus go to the cross?

The justice of God does not require it. The justice of God only requires that sin be judged. Every descendant of Adam and Eve could have been judged and condemned and that would have satisfied the justice of God. The need for the cross is seen in the love of God.

1. The Fact of God's Love: *For God so loved the world... (3:16).*

This is the first time the Bible ever says that God loved the world. The Jews knew that God loved Israel. They never dreamed that this love would be extended to the Gentiles. Jesus is saying something new. He is saying that God loved the world. This was a new and a revolutionary teaching. The Old Testament speaks about how

God loves Israel and how He loves the righteous, but there is no clear statement to be found there that God loves the world.

Notice that God SO loved the world. He didn't just love us. He SO loved us that He gave. The measure of God's love will be seen in what He gave.

2. The Measure of God's Love: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son (3:16).*

The love of God produced an effect. The effect of God's love was that He gave His Son. Both of these verbs ("love" and "gave") are given to us in the aorist active indicative.

- The aorist tense looks to the point in time when God's love produced the effect that He gave His Son.
- The active voice demonstrates that it was God who actively accomplished this action.
- The indicative mood points to the reality of these facts. This is not mere wistful thinking. This really happened in history.

God loved so much that He gave. The strength of love is seen in what it does. The strength of a loving gift is seen in what it cost. The love of God produced the most precious gift imaginable. The love of God secured the cross of Christ; the cross did not secure the love of God.

3. The Uniqueness of God's Gift: *His only begotten Son (3:16).*

The gift God gave to the world was unique. It was His "only-born" Son. This title emphasizes two aspects of the person of Jesus.

- It emphasizes the unique birth of Jesus. His birth was totally different from any other birth in history. He was born of a virgin and without sin.
- It emphasizes the unique position of Jesus. He is the Son of God in a way in which no other man or angel can ever claim. He is unique and one of a kind.

4. The Simplicity of Acceptance: *That whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life (3:16).*³

³ Πιστευων is a present active participle, a substantive, indicating those who continue in believing. Thus, *πας ο πιστευων* means "all the believing" or "all who believe." It is for this reason we

The word “that” introduces a purpose clause. This phrase will tell us the purpose of God in giving His Son. He gave His Son so that something might take place. This gives us an insight into the purpose and plan of God. God’s plan is that salvation is to be a free gift to all who will believe in His Son.

Faith is the key that unlocks the door to God’s salvation. This does not mean that faith is the cause of your salvation. Rather it is the instrument through which you receive that salvation.

For example, when I take a fork and feed myself, I do not say that the fork has satisfied my hunger. It is merely the instrument by which that which did satisfy my hunger was brought into effect. The distinction is an important one. Faith cannot save you. You can have a tremendous amount of faith, but it will not in itself do you a bit of good. Only faith in a worthy object will help you.

I worked for a large part of my life as a fire fighter. In that profession, I have often depended upon certain types of equipment. I have had the opportunity to hang suspended from a rope, 25 stories above stone pavement. My life depended upon the proper function of that equipment and I put my faith and my trust in that equipment. If a certain portion of that equipment had failed, then my faith in that equipment would have killed me. Here is the principle. Faith in an unworthy object is as bad as no faith at all. The strength of my faith is only as valuable as the worthiness in which it is placed.

5. The Result of Faith: *Whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life (3:16).*

The result of faith is brought out, first as a negative and then as a positive. The negative deals with death while the positive deals with life.

Should not perish but Should have eternal life
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The contrast between perishing versus having eternal life is made even stronger when we look at the Greek text from which this is translated.

- The phrase “should not perish” is an aorist middle subjunctive. The aorist tense looks to a point in time where this destruction takes place. The use of

can translate this verse to say: *God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son in order to save all the ones believing in Him.*

the subjunctive mood indicates that the outcome is uncertain. It depends upon whether or not the person in question believes.

- The second phrase, “should have eternal life” is a present subjunctive. The present tense sees the believer as having eternal life right now, in contrast to those who do not believe and who look to a time in the future when they enter into destruction.

Do you see the point? A Christian does not merely look to the future for eternal life. He has eternal life RIGHT NOW.

6. The Purpose of God’s Coming: *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him (3:17).*

This was completely opposed to Jewish thinking. The Jews believed that the Messiah would be sent for the express purpose of judging the world.

It is true that Jesus will judge the world, but that was not His primary purpose in coming to the world. He did not come to destroy, but to save from destruction.

My career as a fire fighter has been a career of saving people. To be fair, there is a certain amount of destruction that I have wrought in bringing about such salvation. There are times when I have taken doors off hinges and when I have broken windows and cut holes in buildings. It was not destruction for the sake of destruction. It was a destruction that was designed to stop the spread of fire. The coming of Jesus was like that. He came to save the world.

7. The Escape from God’s Judgment: *He who believes in Him is not judged (3:18).*

Up to this point, we have only emphasized the plan and purpose of God in saving mankind. But now, the emphasis shifts to mankind and his reaction in either accepting or rejecting Jesus.

There is a contrast introduced here. It is a contrast that we shall continue to see throughout the rest of this chapter. It is a contrast between those who believe and those who do not believe.

The One who Believes	The One who does not Believe
He is not judged.	He has been judged already.

He has believed in God's only-born Son.	He has rejected the unique Son of God.
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The one who believes is not judged. Notice the use of the present tense. This one is never judged.

8. The Realization of God's Judgment: *He who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (3:18).*

This time, the tense of the verb changes. It is no longer a present tense. This time, it is a PERFECT tense. The perfect tense describes an action that took place in the past and which has continuing results. The judgment that is described here took place in the past and its results continue forever.

The unbeliever does not have to wait for some future judgment to find out whether God will find him innocent or guilty. He has been judged already. His condemnation is certain. He only awaits the carrying out of his sentence.

This brings us to a question. What is the nature of this judgment? In what sense are men judged who have not believed in the Son? The answer is seen in the next verse.

THE LIGHT AND THE DARKNESS

19 And this is the judgment, that the light is 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 should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:19-21).

There are two principles at work in the world today. They are at odds with one another. They are opposites.

Light and darkness Life and death Good and evil Faith and unbelief Love and hate
--

We know what light is and what it represents. Jesus is the light (John 1:9). God is light and

in Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). Light is what allows you to see things as they are. We know what light is, but what is darkness? Darkness is simply the absence of light.

In verse 16, we were told that God loved the world. Now we are told that men loved darkness rather than light. When God showed forth His love to man, instead of returning that love, men turned away to give their love to that which is at enmity with God. Why did this happen? Why did men turn away from God? The answer is given in the next phrase. It is because their deeds were evil (3:19).

1. *An Evil Motivation: Men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil (3:19).*

Why is it that some men turn away from God and do not want to have anything to do with Him? I used to think that perhaps it was because they had not heard and they did not understand. I used to think that maybe it was because men had examined the Christian faith in an analytical manner and had found it to be lacking. Or maybe it was because they had never seen the evidence that upholds the claims of Christ. I used to share the reasons why we know God exists and why we know the Bible to be the word of God and why we know we have eternal life in Christ. I would share those things and I would wonder that men still did not believe.

That is not why men do not believe. The real reason is given here in this verse. It is because their deeds are evil. It is because men are in sin and they want to remain in their sin and they will reject anything that points out the sin in their lives.

Many years ago when we were living in another dwelling, Paula and I faced a problem not commonly discussed in polite circles. It was a problem of cockroaches. I don't mean the little tiny ones. I mean the great, big palmetto bugs that grow to be several inches long. You could walk into a dark room and turn on the lights and suddenly you would see one or two of these monsters on the kitchen floor. As soon as the lights came on, they would run. They hated the light. As long as you left the room in darkness, they would be comfortable. As soon as the lights came on, they would scurry away. They hated the light.

Men are like that. They can be comfortable and somewhat happy in the midst of their sins. But let the light of the message of a holy and righteous God come into their presence, and suddenly there is a strange scurrying.

2. *An Evil Hatred of Light: For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (3:20).*

Men are not naturally drawn to the gospel. They are not clamoring to hear the message we preach. If they are, then maybe we are preaching the wrong message, for

this passage tells us that it is a message that is naturally hated.

*10 ...as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one;
11 There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God;
12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one." Romans 3:10-12).*

If it is true that no one ever seeks after God and that all turn away, then how is it that anyone is ever saved? It is only as a person is changed on the inside and given a new birth and drawn by the Holy Spirit that he will come to God. This is why Jesus introduced this entire section by talking about the ministry of the Spirit and how the Spirit blows where He wishes.

No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44).

It is only when God reaches down and draws a man to Himself that he will stop hating the light and running from it. At this point, you might be thinking to yourself, "Wait a minute, John. I know people who are not Christians and yet they are nice people. What about them?"

I want to suggest to you that the reason people are not offended by Christianity when they do not embrace Christianity is that they do not understand Christianity. When a person is confronted with the claims of Jesus, he will always have one of two reactions. Either he will reject Jesus or he will turn to Him in faith.

If he rejects Christ, if he does not trust in Jesus as His Lord and Savior, then a hardening process will begin. From this time onward, the more he is exposed to Christ, the harder will be his resolve in his resolution.

Have you ever noticed that the world cannot ever agree on anything, except that it agrees it does not like Jesus? People can be confronted with all sorts of beliefs and philosophies and not be bothered by them, but if you speak out on the gospel of Jesus Christ, you will meet a resistance that was not previously there. The man who said he did not like to talk about religion was not talking about the new age movement or about reincarnation or about evolutionary thought. He was talking about Christianity.

3. A Contrasting Character: *But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God (3:21).*

This verse concludes with a contrast between the one who has rejected Christ versus

the one who has come to Him.

Unbeliever	Believer
He does evil.	He practices the truth.
He hates the light and does not come to that light.	He comes to the light.
Does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.	Comes so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought by God.
He is not judged (3:18).	He is judged already (3:18).

Verse 20 describes the characteristics of the man who has rejected Jesus Christ. The reason he will not come to Christ is because the light will illuminate the true nature of his life. It will reveal that he is evil.

Verse 21 describes the characteristics of the believer. He is not afraid to come to the light because his deeds will not condemn him. On the contrary, it will be demonstrated in the light that those deeds have been “wrought in God.”

A similar contrast is found in the opening verses of John’s epistle.

Unbeliever	Believer
<i>If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1 John 1:6).</i>	<i>If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7).</i>
<i>If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8).</i>	<i>If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).</i>
<i>If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1 John 1:10).</i>	<i>If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).</i>

This brings us to a question. In which group are you? Have you entered into the light? Have you come into a place of fellowship with the Father? Have you trusted in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

If you have not, then I have some good news for you. It is not too late. You can come to Christ in faith right now. You can believe in Him, entrusting yourself to Him. You can enter into God's family right now. That is the good news.

If you will not do so, then there is no good news for you. If you will not trust in Christ, then there remains no other way of salvation. There remains only the judgment of God.