

John 3:1–21 (NIV2011)

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He 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.”

³Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

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!”

⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”

⁹“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”

¹¹Very 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. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever 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. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But 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.

Sometimes our expectations can blind us to the truth. A Pharisee comes to Jesus in the night and cannot see that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s love.

Expectations are very powerful. Have you ever taken a bite of something, say a pudding, thinking that it is one flavor when it is actually another. And though you actually like both flavors, the spoonful still tastes awful. It wasn’t what your brain thought it would be, so it tastes weird.

I suppose all movie-goers have learned that our expectations have a lot to do with how much we enjoy a movie. Sometimes, a mediocre movie can seem like a masterpiece if my expectations are low enough going in. (OK . . . not a masterpiece, but at least I stay until the end!).

The Jews of Jesus’ day had an established set of expectations surrounding God’s long-promised Messiah. He would arrive in power and might and wonder and glory. No one could possibly miss it.

Thus, we shouldn’t be at all surprised that the stories of Jesus’ encounters with people always contain an element of cluelessness. They can’t see the truth about Jesus because, in part, he simply doesn’t match up with any of their expectations. They see in Jesus

something powerful and magnetic, but his words and actions leave them dazed and confused.

This was as much true for the religious leaders of the day as it was for the masses. Indeed, I'd bet that the educated students and teachers of the Hebrew Scriptures would have been even more blinded by their expectations. After all, they had a lot invested in the fruit of their life's work. In today's passage we meet an educated man, a Pharisee actually, who comes to Jesus seeking to understand, but remains largely clueless.

In the night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee¹ and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a villager from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus' world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry² for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. "Who is he?" the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn't just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.³

There, Nicodemus sat in front of Jesus looking only ever more confused. Born a second time? Born from above? Blowing wind and the kingdom of God? What is Jesus talking about? Crazy talk. I know the Scriptures inside and out, Nicodemus thought to himself. None of this is making any sense! Jesus had even taken him to task, wondering how Nicodemus could possibly be a teacher of the people if he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. Bewilderment and insults – that pretty much summed it up. Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived.

Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, "You must be born from above"? How was Nicodemus to make sense of what Jesus told him? Should he even try?

Born of water and Spirit

The problem is that Jesus tried to lead Nicodemus into a facet of God's truth that has been perplexing to people for these last two thousand years. Few topics will raise as many eyebrows and create as much as confusion as discussions of the Holy Spirit, and his work in each of us and in this world. It is a story that is grounded in the Old Testament; nonetheless, most of us need a guide to help our understanding.

¹The Pharisees were an important group of Jews for nearly two centuries before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The Pharisees were committed to the careful keeping of God's Law and waited, with great anticipation, for the coming of the Messiah, God's kingdom, and the bodily resurrection of the dead. In their religious lives, some Pharisees followed a path of piety while others pursued political, even revolutionary, agendas.

²The temple in Jerusalem was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. During Passover, the great celebration of liberty and salvation, the temple and its courtyards were turned into a charnal house as thousands of Jews came to purchase animals that would then be slaughtered by the temple priests in sacrificial rituals.

³Obviously, I'm using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus. Also, every time John refers to "night" in his gospel, it is a reference to spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is living in the darkness as he comes to confront the light that is Jesus.

Nicodemus ought to be such a guide, for he is a Pharisee, a supposed expert in Hebrew Scripture. But no, he is as confused as anyone.

So, Jesus pushed hard on the man, for not understanding when he should (v. 10). Nicodemus should understand that when Jesus speaks of being “born of water and Spirit”⁴ he is calling on common OT imagery of cleansing repentance and God’s life-giving spirit being poured out on the people of God (see esp. Ezekiel 36:25-27).⁵ He should grasp that God’s promises of a day when God would dwell in his people’s hearts are happening in and through Jesus.

Jesus wants Nicodemus to grasp that being part of God’s people and their entry into God’s kingdom, had never been about what Nicodemus had most valued: the Law, circumcision, the temple, the land. Instead, it had always been and still was about faith, faith that was possible only after the radical transformation, the rebirth, brought by the Spirit of God.

When we are “born of water and the Spirit,” when we are cleansed and given new life, the transformation is total, reaching into every part of our being. This is not about adding something to us that was lacking. It is not about fixing something that was broken. It is not about any incremental approach. Rather, it is about our complete and utter rebirth, regeneration, re-creation.

Granted, we often don’t act like the born-from-above people of God, a bit like a child who isn’t acting his age. But the Spirit works with each of us so that as we mature in

“Born from above” or “Born again”

V. 3 in today’s passage gave us the phrase “born-again Christian.” The Greek word here, *anōthen*, can mean either “from above” or “again.” Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean “again” for he asks how someone could revisit Mom’s womb and be born a second time. Yet, Jesus insists to Nicodemus that this new beginning, this regeneration is the work of the Spirit, who comes from above.¹

Though John’s other uses of *anōthen* in the gospel all clearly mean “from above,” here he almost certainly has in mind a double meaning, as John does with some other words when there is a point to be made. Christians are both “born again” and “born from above.”

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are made new. Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are “born of God” and have “become children of God” (John 1:12-13). This generation of new life is a complete, total, radical transformation of our whole being. “Born again” is an apt and dramatic analogy.

But this new birth is also a birth “from above.” This is God’s work, specifically the work of the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Jesus, God’s Spirit, dwells in us. Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul isn’t talking about going to your fitness club or staying on your diet. “Body” (*soma* in the Greek) refers to the total, whole person.

The second birth is a birth from God, “from above.” And it is a birth given to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who trust him completely. The phrase “born-again Christian” is redundant. All Christians have been born again and from above.

1. In the cosmology of the ancients, the gods lived “up there,” in the heavens. From there, the gods could look down on the lives of the humans. The ancient Jews believed that we could speak of God as being “up there,” literally, God the Most High. Thus, when Jesus returns to the Father (Acts 1), he ascends to the “above.” Likewise, the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples on Pentecost, coming from “above.”

⁴ Jesus isn’t speaking to Nicodemus about Christian baptism, as is often supposed. How could Nicodemus be expected to understand a practice that didn’t even exist yet? Further, entry into the kingdom is not given or denied on the basis of baptism. I better illustrate what I mean. Imagine an adult who has never been baptized and comes to faith in Christ, yet is killed on his way to his own baptism. Or the infant who dies before her baptism. Would we really imagine that Jesus would turn away either of these? Baptism is a gift from God intended for all the people of God, but it is not some sort of magic ticket which must be punched or all is lost.

⁵See D.A. Carson’s highly regarded commentary on John in the Pillar NT Commentary series.

Christ, our thoughts, words, and actions increasingly conform to the new person God has created. All this, because God loves us so much that he gave his only Son on that cross, so we might be offered the new birth of water and the Spirit.

Seeing love

Quite a conversation that Nicodemus had with Jesus. Little did Nicodemus know that he was talking with the very embodiment of God's love. Want to know what love looks like? Look at Jesus. Even better, look at the cross on which Jesus died. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

How could Nicodemus really be expected to understand such a thing, to comprehend the depth of God's love? How could we? You and I are finite creatures, weighted down by pride and envy even as we strive to love. How could we really comprehend the love that is embodied in Jesus?

Perhaps all we can do is to ask God to forgive our own cluelessness and pray that he would help our hearts to grow so that we might have an ever-deeper appreciation of what love really is when it is plainly seen.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Arthur Jones has written the following questions for our Connection Groups to use in their group discussion.

1. In the first conversation in chapter 2, Jesus has a conversation with Nicodemus which is layered with complexity. The book of John so far has introduced us to Jesus, telling us of his status as God, his acts of power (turning water into wine), and his objections to the religious practices of Jerusalem. This conversation with Nicodemus tells us that the gift of God coming to earth is offered to each of us if we are born again; "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

- a. After Jesus' final explanation, how do you think Nicodemus interpreted being born again from above? What does being born again mean for you?
- b. The text is clear to state that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He clearly did not want to be seen talking to Jesus. Talking to Jesus is sometimes dangerous. When have your questions to God or your faith been dangerous? Should it be in 21st century America?

2. In the second conversation, John the Baptist makes his last appearance in the book of John and his disciples take it as competition: "well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him" (v26). John was willing to make himself less so that Jesus would become most important. For John the Baptist, the truth of Jesus allows him to diminish with full joy. How do we become more like John the Baptist, willing to give up our own ego for God, and less like his evidently clueless disciples? How would John say that it was possible to have this new view – to be born from above?

2. Jesus is so intriguing that a leader in Jewish law comes at night to ask questions of this wandering rabbi. Jesus has such authority that one of the greatest religious leaders of the day was willing to diminish his role so that Jesus might grow in power. And in each of the conversations, people are still left clueless to the true identity of God. John is helping us see the truth; how do we invite others to see this truth themselves. Everything is at stake – "whoever believes in the son of God has eternal life." How do we testify to the truth that God came down to earth?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Ezekiel 36:25-27 God promises to renew his people by water and the Spirit.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 3:22-36 John testifies again about Jesus</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 John 4:7-21 God's love and ours</p>	<p>Thursday, John 7:45-52 Nicodemus defends Jesus at a meeting of Pharisees in Jerusalem.</p>
<p>Friday, John 19:38-42 Nicodemus honors Jesus after his crucifixion.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

