

# GOSPEL OF JOHN: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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## *“Born from Above”*

John 3:1-15

Turn with me in your Bibles to John Chapter 3. We are going to look at the first 15 verses. It has been a little while since we met so I am going to reach back to the beginning of the chapter for context. Let's read our text and then we'll go verse by verse through it. Beginning at verse 1 John writes:

<sup>1</sup>There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered and said to him, “**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**”

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.**”

<sup>9</sup>Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered and said to him, “**Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? <sup>11</sup>Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. <sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.**”

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Last time we looked at some different ways that people react when they meet or hear about Jesus. Some people immediately reject what they hear and go back to living their lives. They love living in the darkness of the world. Others reject Jesus and then come against Him — like the religious leaders of Jerusalem. Then there are those that like what they hear and see, but they are only following the miracles Jesus performs. So when difficulties arise, they hit the road. But some who come in contact with Jesus genuinely seek Him. They want to know who this Carpenter from Galilee truly is. Such was the case for a religious leader of the Jews named Nicodemus.

Like many others who were in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover, Nicodemus had either seen or heard about Jesus raising the Temple. He had also been privy to the many good works that the Lord did while He was there. Like some before and many after, he just had to know who Jesus was. So Nicodemus sets out in the cool of the night, after the busyness of the day, to meet this most intriguing young man. And that is where we begin our study. Look at verse 1:

**There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.**

As we learned last time, this was not just anyone that came to see Jesus. Nicodemus was a **“ruler of the Jews,”** a member of the ruling class called the Sanhedrin. This would be like one of our senators or a Supreme Court justice coming to see Jesus. He was also a Pharisee, belonging to the strictest religious sect of the time. This powerful religious man could have sent any number of Levites or priests to question the Lord. They had done so before with both Him and John the Baptist. But Nicodemus goes on the journey himself. That is something countless believers have done since the Lord became flesh.

You cannot come to know Jesus through others. They may bring you to Him. In fact, that is our job, to bring others to Jesus and Jesus to others. But only He can save you. So Nicodemus comes personally to the throne of grace. And when he meets Jesus this is what he says (verse 2):

**This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”**

Unlike the others who were coming to get some more bread and fish, Nicodemus saw that Jesus was different. He knew that the miracles He did were a work of God. I believe this is because he knew God’s Word and was looking for Messiah. He had read about the good things He would do. Of course, like all the people of his time, Nicodemus was looking for a Conquering King. But the first time Jesus came, He was a Suffering

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Servant. Nicodemus knew that God was with Jesus. Little did he know that God (Immanuel) was with him, looking him in the eye. And the reply that Jesus gives this rich and powerful man catches him completely by surprise. Instead of giving Nicodemus some discourse on who He was, Jesus says this (verse 3):

**Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

Can you imagine what was going on in the mind of Nicodemus?

He was expecting Jesus to tell him all about the works He was doing and the miracles He performed. But instead, Jesus cuts through the flattery and immediately gets to the heart of the issue. What Nicodemus was really looking for was a matter of the heart. True, he was looking for the Kingdom of God. But all of us, in the inner man, know that there is something lacking in our lives. And this is not a physical thing.

Nicodemus did not need Jesus to come and conquer the Romans. He didn't need Jesus to set up His kingdom here on earth. He needed Jesus to save him, personally, from the grip of sin and death. And that is exactly where Jesus takes him. He tells Nicodemus that he must be **“born again”** to see the Kingdom of God.

The people of the world, and some in the church, have maligned this idea of the born-again experience. But it is really quite simple.

The phrase translated **“born again”** can also mean *“born from above.”* Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we need a spiritual transformation. And that can only come by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the way that it works:

Man, like the Trinity (God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), is a trichotomy. We are made up of three things: body, soul and spirit. Some say we are just body and spirit, but that is a discussion for another time. Just know this — the fact that we have a spirit is what makes us distinct from other creatures. Because God is Spirit, those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Originally, man was made with his spirit on top and was able to communicate with God. The soul, *our conscience*, was in the middle. And the body, our natural man, was on the bottom. But when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, something bad happened.

What did God say would happen if they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

They would **“surely die”** (Genesis 2:17).

Did they?

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Not physically. Their spirit died, and they lost their ability to fellowship with God. The flesh, their bodily appetites, took over. We took a deep dive into this reality when we studied Paul's letter to the Romans, especially in chapter 7. The spiritual battle between the flesh and the spirit is intense, even for the seasoned believer. So now the flesh (the body) is on top, and the spirit on the bottom. Thus it needs to be regenerated by a work of the Holy Spirit. That is what happens when we are born again or, born from above. But here is the important thing to know about this miracle.

It has nothing to do with us. It is all a work of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Just like when we were first born and God breathed life into us, so we must be reborn. And it is all predicated by what Jesus did for us on the Cross. The moment we trust in Jesus as our Savior, the Spirit of God breathes life into us and we become brand new.

Nicodemus should have known this, but he was caught up in a works-based salvation. He believed that two things drew him closer to God: his Jewishness and his keeping of the Law. The **“teacher of Israel”** now becomes the student. Look how Nicodemus reacts when Jesus tells him he needs to be born from above (verse 4):

**Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”**

Do you see how earthbound Nicodemus was in his understanding of salvation?

He knows there is something missing in his life; he is looking to make a change. But he assumes that it is something that HE has to do. That is called religion, man reaching up to God to try to reconcile his relationship with the Creator. And it is practiced by every religious group except for Biblical Christianity. Let's sneak into the mind of this man for a moment.

Nicodemus was a Jewish scholar, schooled in the Old Testament. He had read the promises of God made to Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In fact, he made it his business to memorize the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. He believed that God would keep every promise that He made to the nation of Israel. One of them is known as the New Covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-33 records this covenant. Listen to what he wrote:

**<sup>31</sup>“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—<sup>32</sup>not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds,**

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**and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.**

There are three promises made by God in this passage. Israel would be brought back into the land, their hearts for God would be revived, and their kingdom would be reestablished. So God would return them logistically, regenerate them spiritually, and restore them politically.

The first two, in Nicodemus' mind, had been fulfilled. The Jews had returned from Babylon, and there was a revival of sorts happening at that time. His sect of Judaism, the Pharisees, consisted of 6,000 rabbis from all across Israel. And they were showing a renewed zeal for the Law. He understood that a political resurgence of Israel was the next thing God was going to do. That is why he believed Messiah would save Israel from the Roman occupation. But here is Nicodemus' mistake.

He interpreted the Pharisees legalism as a revival. He didn't realize that what people needed was a new heart, not just a changed one. Legalism can alter a person's conduct. But only the Spirit of God can give one a new, revived spirit. That is why Jesus slows Nicodemus down.

The Jews had returned, but they needed a new heart in order to see the Kingdom. By the way, the same is true for all of us. You have to be made alive spiritually to participate in God's Kingdom. That is why Jesus tells Nicodemus this (verse 5):

**Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."**

This verse has caused some confusion among Christians. Some have thought that to be "born of water" means to be water baptized. But there is no real Old Testament foundation for this. Being baptized is an outward expression of something that has already happened to a believer. Others say it is speaking of our natural birth. And this may be true, but it is a little simplistic. Still others say it means to be born again by the Word of God, being washed by the Word (Ephesians 5). And, of course, we are. So it could be any of these things or all of them in combination.

But I think that Jesus was taking this "teacher" to school. Listen for the words "water" and "spirit" in Ezekiel 36:24-27, and I think we get an answer to what Jesus was speaking. Speaking of this New Covenant Ezekiel writes:

**<sup>24</sup>For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup>Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all**

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**your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup>I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup>I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.**

The “**teacher of Israel,**” as Jesus will call Nicodemus in just a moment, should have known this passage. I think Jesus was giving Nicodemus a Bible lesson. He was helping this learned man understand his Bible a little better. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. And the Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. So Jesus is telling Nicodemus to study Ezekiel to find out about being born from above. That is where he will find out all about what God was truly going to do.

God is going to cleanse spiritual Israel from sin. God is going to regenerate their dead “**spirit,**” bringing them back to life spiritually. And then God the Holy Spirit is going to come and live within them. This would have happened in Israel at that time had the people accepted Jesus as Messiah. But they did not.

So God took this message to the world. In the end, He will fulfill this promise to Israel. But for now, He is moving in and through the Church. Herbert Hirt, in an article he wrote for *Israel My Glory*, explained this. In summary he wrote:

*We have attempted to show that while the New Covenant was made with the nation of Israel, Jesus Christ instituted the New Covenant so that during this present age anyone can enjoy the provisions of the New Covenant of forgiveness and the Spirit through faith in Him. Even though the nation Israel is still disobedient, this does not mean that their promised national redemption has been fulfilled by the Church. Rather, after the Gospel has gone to all the world and the Lord has finished building His Church, He will turn to Israel and bring them in under the New Covenant so that all the promises made to them in the Old Testament might be fulfilled.*

Praise the Lord that He has chosen to work both in and through the Church in this age and turn His attention back on Israel during the Tribulation. His plan of the ages is fueled by His mercy and grace. But Jesus has more to explain to our friend Nicodemus about being born from above. Look at verses 6-7:

**<sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’**

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It takes a mighty work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate the dead spirit of man. Pharisaism (legalism) can clean up the outside of a person. It can cause their conduct to change. But they will still be dirty inside. This is exactly what Jesus was talking about when He scolded a group of Pharisees in Matthew 23:27. He said:

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men’s* bones and all uncleanness.**

Nicodemus was a deeply religious person. But He was also a walking dead man. He had risen through the ranks to be a respected leader. And he represents the finest person any religion can produce. But what he had was not enough. Religion cannot save you. Neither can philosophy, psychology or politics. Not mysticism or meditation. Only Jesus saves because He is the unique God-Man who can take your sin to the Cross and then exchange them for HIS righteousness. Only He can afford you what is needed to purchase for you a brand new spirit.

Why?

Because only He could pay the price that was necessary. Although it might seem that Nicodemus was already transformed unto God, he was not. And unless he accepts Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior, he will die in his sin. I think, in the end, Nicodemus does come to know Jesus in this way. He and Joseph of Arimathea collect the dead body of Jesus and place it in the garden tomb. But for now, he is still seeking. So Jesus gives Nicodemus another lesson in the Book of Ezekiel. Look at verse 8:

**The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

I like to think that, as Jesus and Nicodemus were sitting on that roof in the cool of the evening, a breeze kicked up. This gave Jesus the perfect prop to explain what He meant. Wind is invisible, but it creates effects that can be seen like the flapping of a flag or the swaying of branches on a tree. That is what the born-again experience is like.

It is not a formula or a prayer. It is a sovereign move of the Holy Spirit in the life of a person who accepts God’s gracious plan. You can’t watch it, but you can see the results in the lives of those who experience it. Some have a radical change the moment they get saved. Others really don’t feel anything. But they all know in their heart that they are different. They know that the Spirit has moved, because they don’t desire the things of the world anymore. And their life displays this because they have no desire to do the sinful things they used to do.

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Does it make the person perfect?

No — it makes them forgiven and brand new.

It is now just as if they had never sinned. This had to be a tough pill for Nicodemus to swallow. He had spent his whole life trying to please God by living a life that was acceptable to Him. But like a fleeting wind, he had nothing to show for it. Look at his reaction to what Jesus just told him (verse 9). He was “blown away.”

**Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”**

I can understand what Nicodemus was going through. Having been raised in a legalistic religion (Catholicism), I didn't understand the “**born again**” thing. In fact, my brother is like Nicodemus. We had a long talk last year about being born again, and he still doesn't get it. Man wants to be able to do something about his predicament, especially a man like Nicodemus.

Have you ever witnessed to a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness?

These people live outwardly righteous lives. But like Nicodemus, they are the walking dead. And they are really hard to reach. But Jesus gives it another try. Look what He says in verse 10:

**Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”**

Many believe that Jesus said this because Nicodemus should have known what Jesus was teaching him. We just read about the New Covenant as found in Ezekiel 36. But Nicodemus is not ready for a change yet. So Jesus continues giving him a spiritual lesson from one of the prophets. In chapter 37, the Lord has Ezekiel look over a valley filled with dry bones. He was going to use this picture as an illustration of the New Covenant He just promised. Remember in our study of this wonderful book, the Lord often used visions to illustrate the truths he was going to have his prophet share. You can turn there for a moment if you like. Beginning in verse 4 look what Ezekiel writes:

**<sup>4</sup>Again He said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.” ’ ”**

**<sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to**



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bone. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but *there was no breath in them.*

<sup>9</sup>Also He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ’ ”

The Lord has just promised Israel a new heart and new spirit (chapter 36). Here He is giving us a picture of this event happening. Nicodemus should have known all of this. But he was caught up in the man-made religion of his time. The important thing to notice here, and the part that Nicodemus missed, was that it is the Lord who is going to give life to the dry bones. It is Him, and Him alone, who is going to one day breathe new life into them. And the One who will one day do this for Israel was standing there talking to him. Look what Jesus says next (verse 11):

**Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.**

Who is the “**We**” Jesus is talking about?

Some believe it is the Godhead (pronouns all in caps). God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all give witness to the fact that you need to be born again to see and enter the Kingdom of God. Others just see this as an editorial *we* — the Lord speaking of Himself in the plural. What is important to understand is it was all there in God’s Word for anyone to see.

All we have to do is believe what it says and receive the forgiveness God has to offer. All we have to do is to admit that we are nothing but dry bones in need of newness of life. And Jesus will give it to us. But for Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees, it was difficult to accept this witness. This is why (verses 12):

**If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?**

Jesus had used the natural to explain the supernatural, the human to explain the heavenly. And this was hard for Nicodemus to accept. Think about it this way:

All of his life, everyone had probably told Nicodemus how smart he was and what a holy man he was. People had listened to him and come to him for counsel. Now, this Carpenter from Galilee is claiming to have knowledge that Nicodemus has never heard. In essence, Jesus is telling this learned man that his thinking is earthbound and carnal. He needs to be more heavenly minded. And, I believe, in the end he gets there. But just

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in case, Jesus leaves him with one more thing to keep in mind as he continues on his spiritual journey. Look at verses 13-15:

**<sup>13</sup>No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. <sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.**

This is the first of many verses where Jesus says He has “**come down from heaven.**”

Do you think this scrambled Nicodemus’ eggs just a little more?

I think it did.

But it also gave him much food for thought. Jesus takes the “**teacher of Israel**” all the way back to Numbers Chapter 24 to help him understand why he needs to be born from above.

Well, guess who came from above?

Jesus did.

And who gets lifted up to save the people from the poison in their lives?

Read Numbers 24, especially verses 4-9, and put it alongside what Jesus is teaching here. And then next time we’ll see if we can understand why God so loved the world that He sent His Son to save it.

Let’s pray.

SING THE REVELATION SONG