

Jesus & Nicodemus – Part 1

John 3:1-13

INTRODUCTION:

This morning, we will be looking at an important conversation between two important people who represent two similar but different worldviews. One is a religious teacher who represents God, and the other is a religious teacher who is God. Who wouldn't have loved to be a fly on the wall that night to hear this secret conversation?

A backdrop to keep in mind is the Temple theme where Heaven and Earth come together which we have spent time touching on recently. This theme will occur repeatedly, and in our text, you will see the rumblings of Heaven and Earth in the background.

John 3:1-13

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. ²After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you."

³ Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

⁴ "What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?"

⁵ Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. ⁷ So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."

⁹ "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things? ¹¹ I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. ¹² But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly

things? ¹³No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven.¹

I. A Secret Conversation (1-3)

- A. A man from the Pharisees, named Nicodemus a ruler of the Jews, came to meet Jesus at night. This recognition by John of Nicodemus would have put Nicodemus in a well-to-do class of society.
- B. By this time, there was probably some tension between the ministry of Jesus and the Pharisees. We see this in Matthew 15 and ultimately later in Matthew 23.
- C. One might ask, “Who were the Pharisees?”
- D. A brief discussion regarding their background:

Hendriksen and Kistemaker

Nicodemus belonged to the party of the *Pharisees*. This party seems to have originated during the period preceding the Maccabean wars. It may be looked upon as the crystallization of a reaction against the *secularistic* spirit of Hellenism. During the second century B.C. those people who abhorred the idolatrous customs of the Greeks and who, during the fierce religious persecution led by the monstrously wicked Antiochus Epiphanes, stood firm and refused to abandon the faith, were called ḥašidhim (Pietists or Saints). They were the forerunners of the Pharisees (Separatists), who began to appear under that name during the reign of John Hyrcanus (135–105 B.C.).²

Everett Ferguson

The name *Pharisee* is usually derived from the Hebrew *parush*, meaning “separate” but also “interpret.

The Pharisees appear to have been for the most part non-priests. The concerns of the rabbis who succeeded them, as indicated by rabbinic literature, would indicate that their adherents included small landowners and the shopkeepers and artisans of the towns. The Pharisees’ reputation for exactitude in the study and interpretation of

¹ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](#) (Jn 3:1–13). Tyndale House Publishers.

² Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). [*Exposition of the Gospel According to John*](#) (Vol. 1, pp. 130–131). Baker Book House.

the biblical law and their applications of it to areas of life where other Jews did not apply it distinguished them from other Jews. Their interpretations and applications were attributed to the “traditions of the elders.” It is estimated that two-thirds of the rabbinic traditions concern ritual purity, and this concern led to a great interest in the proper preparation of foods, careful observance of the agricultural laws, and meticulous tithing.

Because the Pharisees saw Torah as a developing, dynamic social force, they sought to keep the law of Moses from becoming a dead ritual and to give it new meaning and life. Thus they were also open to further doctrinal developments—resurrection of the body, last judgment, and rewards and punishment in the afterlife.

Jesus and the Pharisees

The sharp rebukes Jesus administered to the Pharisees and their frequent appearance as his antagonists have obscured the considerable area of agreement between them. Jesus lived as a loyal Jew and accepted the authority of the Torah (cf. such details as Mark 6:56; 1:40–45; 14:12; 12:36). He had many friendly contacts with certain Pharisees (Luke 7:36ff.; 11:37; 13:31–33; 14:1; Mark 12:28–34; Matt. 23:1–2). These verses, if nothing else, should have made unnecessary the lesson many Christians have had to learn from Jewish scholars that “Pharisee” was not synonymous with “hypocrite.” Any way of life based on authoritative teaching or law has a tendency to hypocrisy, and no doubt there were hypocrites among the Pharisees. Yet just as Epicurus was not an “Epicurean,” so the Pharisees were not “Pharisaical.” The relationship between inner motive and outward conduct is often differently perceived by those who adhere to a given practice and those who disagree with it. Much of Jesus’ ethical teaching finds parallels in rabbinic literature.³

E. Nicodemus didn’t want to have the conversation except at night probably because of the tension mentioned above, but also to have some private space with Jesus to ask serious questions.

Craig Keener in the IVP Bible Background Commentary

One might come by night to avoid being seen, or because Jewish teachers who worked during the day could study only at night (cf. Ps 119:148; the latter was undoubtedly not the case with Nicodemus, who would not need to work—v. 1). But

³ Ferguson, E. (2003). [*Backgrounds of Early Christianity*](#) (Third Edition, p. 517). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

John includes the detail because it serves the theme of light and darkness (1:4–5; 11:10; 13:30) that brackets this *narrative (3:19–21).⁴

- F. Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a teacher, a Rabbi, but doesn't in the context know what to do with Jesus which creates questions and the motivation of his visit.
- G. Many people who are religious when they discover Jesus of the Bible do not know what to do with Jesus. He doesn't fit their box, ideologies, or manner in which they expect religion to be, both high and low church. God is much bigger than that! They recognize Jesus but don't know what to do with Him as with the rest of humanity not knowing what to do with Jesus.
- H. Nicodemus states, "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." This by definition is a confession and condemnation of themselves. He confesses that Jesus is on the side of God and God must be on the side of Jesus based on the evidence, yet they push back.
- I. Nicodemus' confession attests to the whole leadership of Jews, which had obviously been a point of discussion based on this statement, that God is with Jesus in a special way, yet, they had problems, concerns, or some sort of issue with Jesus.

II. A Troubling Concept (3-8)

- A. Now remember the backdrop of our Temple discussion is Heaven and Earth coming back together. This theme will be present throughout this conversation.
- B. Jesus wastes no time in saying, "I tell you the truth unless you are born again you will never see the kingdom of God."
- C. Now many of us have grown up with the idea of being "born again" or identifying as a "born again" Christian. At the same time many of us have never put two and two together understanding the concept of being "born again" is a reference to the new world.

⁴ Keener, C. S. (2014). *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Second Edition, p. 255). IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press.

D. Being born again is not just a spiritual decision, but a reality that connects us to the coming world.

N.T. Wright

I have lost my birth certificate.

It's the sort of thing that happens when you move house, which we did not long ago. I know where it was in the old house. It may have been accidentally thrown away; but I suspect it was put into a very, very safe place, and the place was so safe that I still haven't found it.

Fortunately, I don't need it at the moment. I have a passport and other documents. Sooner or later, if it doesn't show up, I shall have to get a replacement, which means going back to the town where I was born and paying to have a new copy made from the register there.

But, of course, the one thing that a birth certificate isn't needed for is to prove that a birth took place. Here I am, a human being; obviously I must have been born. The fact that at the moment I can't officially prove when and where is a minor detail.

When Christians discuss the 'new birth', the 'second birth' or the 'birth from above', they often forget this. Some people experience their entry into Christian **faith** as a huge, tumultuous event, with a dramatic build-up, a painful moment of decision and then tidal waves of relief, joy, exhilaration, forgiveness and love. They are then easily tempted—and there are movements of thought within Western culture which make this temptation all the more powerful—to think that this moment itself is the centre of what it means to be a Christian, as though what God wanted was simply to give people a single wonderful spiritual experience, to be remembered ever afterwards with a warm glow.

But that's a bit like someone framing their birth certificate, hanging it on the wall, and insisting on showing it to everyone who comes into the house. What matters for most purposes is not that once upon a time you were born—though of course sometimes it matters that you can prove when and where you were born. What matters is that you are alive *now*, and that your present life, day by day and moment by moment, is showing evidence of health and strength and purpose.⁵

⁵ Wright, T. (2004). [*John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10*](#) (pp. 28–29). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

- E. Side note: Doesn't the phrase "born again" sound a lot like "a do-over" like in playground rules?
- F. This being born again is definitely a "do-over" of sorts from our past but also an event pointing us into God's new future.
- G. When Jesus mentions you must be born again this was a troubling concept to Nicodemus who asks a serious but silly sort of question, "How can one go back a second time into the mother's womb?"
- H. We all know that this was an unreasonable question, but shows the literalness of his thinking.
- I. This idea had completely missed Nicodemus because of his literalness of the phrase "born again."
- J. Sometimes we get lost because of our literalness and miss the overflowing movement of where Scripture is going.
- K. Jesus states that one must be born of water and spirit. Water refers to physical birth as when the mother's water breaks or also refers to a new beginning which a birth would certainly qualify for. But also, Spirit refers to the spiritual birth of being regenerated by God's Spirit coming and living within you in forgiveness and a new birth of new beginnings.

Craig Keener

Converts to Judaism were said to become "as newborn children"; their conversion included immersion in water to remove Gentile impurity. "Born of water" thus could clarify for Nicodemus that "born from above" means conversion, not a second physical birth.

The Greek wording of 3:5 can mean either "water and the Spirit" or "water, that is, the Spirit." Ezekiel 36:24–27 used water symbolically for the cleansing of the Spirit (cf. especially the *Dead Sea Scrolls), so here Jesus could mean "converted by the Spirit" (cf. 7:37–39)—a *spiritual* *proselyte *baptism. Whereas Jewish teachers generally spoke of converts to Judaism as "newborn" only in the sense that they were legally severed from old relationships, an actual rebirth by the Spirit would produce a new heart (Ezek 36:26).⁶

⁶ Keener, C. S. (2014). [*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*](#) (Second Edition, p. 255). IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press.

L. Jesus is introducing New Creation to Nicodemus through the metaphor of the birthing process, yet he doesn't understand.

M. Jesus brings out that a person "born from above" moves about like the wind, mysteriously, to the world around him.

N. As Christians, we aren't to be "weird" to the world, but rather we are mysterious to the world. For example,

Matthew 5:38-45

³⁸ "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. ⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. ⁴² Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow. ⁴³ "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.

O. This passage outlines the behaviors of a new humanity that will be very mysterious to the world.

P. This new heart produces a new kind of humanity fit to rule the New Creation as Adam was first created to rule this one.

J.C. Ryle

"To be born again is, as it were, to enter upon a new existence, to have a new mind, a new heart, new views, new principles, new tastes, new affections, new likings, new dislikings, new fears, new joys, new sorrows, new love to things once hated, new hatred to things once loved, new thoughts of God, and ourselves, and the world, and the life to come, and salvation."

III. A Curious Clash of Understanding (9-13)

- A. Nicodemus asks the question, “How can this be so?”
- B. Jesus is bringing the idea that God wants to renew the whole world, which he gets to later in this conversation, where Heaven and Earth come together under the rule of a new humanity. But for this new humanity to be where they can be in a place fit and ready to rule the new world, they must be born of Water and the Spirit cleansed of the sin of this world.
- C. When Nicodemus asks the question pointed out in subsection A, Jesus responds, “Here you are a teacher of Israel, and you don’t know these things?”
- D. This is like a pastor in ministry or a long-time Christian not knowing about New Creation or Temple theology as being essential to understanding the Bible.
- E. A lack of Scriptural knowledge has never stopped someone from filling the position of leader, but a lack of Scriptural knowledge has made many leaders ineffective for the Kingdom.
- F. Here Israel’s teacher and leader does not understand the essentials of where the big show of life is heading.
- G. Therefore, Jesus further states that we give you evidence but you won’t accept it.
- H. Many believers today are much like Nicodemus in that they see the evidence but won’t accept it because it does not align with their notions of what they want to be true.
- I. It pushes against their sentimental familiarity.
- J. It uproots what they have always “felt” to be true, and are not ready to accept was false all along.

K. Jesus drives home the point of the backdrop of Heaven and Earth by saying, “If I told of earthly things and you don’t believe, then how will you believe if I speak of Heavenly things.”

CONCLUSION:

A Series of Confessional Questions:

Billy Graham

“The born-again Christian sees life not as a blurred, confused, meaningless mass, but as something planned and purposeful.”

Do you see life this way?

John Stott

“The Christian life is not just our own private affair. If we have been born again into God’s family, not only has he become our Father but every other Christian believer in the world, whatever his nation or denomination, has become our brother or sister in Christ. But it is no good supposing that membership of the universal Church of Christ is enough; we must belong to some local branch of it. Every Christian’s place is in a local church, sharing in its worship, its fellowship, and its witness.”

As members of the “Big C” church, because we have been born again, we are to help change the world into what it will become in the local church. As I have said before, the local church is a New Creation colony in enemy territory until the King returns.

John Bunyan

The kingdom of heaven is for the heirs – and if children, then heirs; if born again, then heirs. Wherefore it is said expressly, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. By this one word, down goes all carnal privilege of being born of flesh and blood, and of the will of man. Canst thou produce the birthright?

Have you been born again?