

John 3:1 – 21

^{3:1} Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus 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.’ 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 be amazed 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.’ ⁹ Nicodemus 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 of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but he who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in him have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall 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 might 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. ¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has 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 for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.’

Historical background:

- *Humanity’s need for God’s new humanity:* Israel learned that evil was inside each person’s heart. Thus, everyone needs to be internally transformed by God
 - Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your *heart* and the *heart* of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your *heart* (Dt.30:6)
 - Create in me a clean *heart*, O God, and renew a steadfast *spirit* within me. (Ps.51:10)
 - I will put My law within them and on their *heart* I will write it... (Jer.31:33)
 - I will give you a new *heart* and put a new *spirit* within you... (Ezk.36:26)

- *Water, Spirit, Wind:* A way of identifying the work of God by the Spirit, which Jesus uses in John 3:5

Genesis 1	Ezekiel 36 – 37	John 3
God created life by His Spirit hovering over water (Gen.1:1 – 2)	God will create a new humanity internally by water and Spirit (Ezk.36:26 – 36)	Jesus causing birth of new humanity by water and Spirit (Jn.3:5)
God breathed into Adam (Gen.2:7)	God will breathe His Spirit like wind into Israel to cause new life (Ezk.37)	Spirit blows like wind to cause new birth; after his resurrection, Jesus breathes his Spirit (Jn.20:22)

- Moses Lifted the Snake in the Wilderness: In John 3:14, Jesus refers to this event



Discussion

1. Leader: Read Ezekiel 36 – 37 and Numbers 21 first!
2. Be sure to give the cultural background first. This will help people understand what the Old Testament is really about, and why Jesus could hold Nicodemus accountable for knowing it.
 - a. 'Transformation of the human heart' passages, especially Ezekiel 36 – 37. See my ppt
 - b. 'Moses lifting the serpent' in Numbers 21:4 – 7.
3. Also, set the context of Nicodemus being a powerful person, trying to broker a deal with Jesus after Jesus had just cleared the Temple. This controversial act would have made the authorities spring into action.
4. Why does Nicodemus come at night? What kind of conversation is this?
 - a. He wants to broker a deal with Jesus, as one powerful person to another. He's saying, 'Let's keep the Sanhedrin in power, my career in place, and the Romans happy. Can you just respect the powers that be?' He wants to entreat Jesus to not be a political or military threat.
 - b. But Nicodemus doesn't want to testify, just like the disciples did in John 1:19 – 51, or the Samaritan woman will do in John 4:1 – 42.
 - c. He doesn't want to lose his position.
5. Why does Jesus respond the way he does?
 - a. Because the Old Testament is the common foundation between them
 - b. The 'born from above' reference along with 'water and Spirit' connects to Ezekiel 36:26 – 36.
 - c. The 'wind' reference connects to Ezekiel 37:1 – 12. Jesus uses it here in this context to warn Nicodemus against trying to control the movement of the Spirit. The Spirit is guiding Jesus, and bringing about those who believe in Jesus. And it will happen all over the place!
6. Does Nicodemus honor or diminish Jesus? The Old Testament?
7. What is Nicodemus trying to deny?
 - a. That the human heart needs transformation?
 - b. The way Jesus is talking? 'Born again' or 'born from above' language refers to the internal transformation.
 - c. Jesus' authority as a teacher?
 - d. APPLICATION: Do you believe that the human problem is internal to us?
8. What does Jesus say about the cure for the venom in humanity?
 - a. The past incident of the snake means that the source of venom is condemned.
 - b. Human beings are the source of the real venom; it's ontological (in our very being, in human nature)
 - c. Jesus will be condemned on the cross – condemning the sinful 'flesh' ('the Word became flesh' in John 1:14). 'Flesh' (3:6) is another word for 'corrupted human nature' (compare to Paul's usage in Romans 7:21, although the dense usage of 'flesh' in John 6 is either indeterminate or neutral). Jesus killed it in himself so that he could rise as a new human being with a God-soaked human nature, to share his Spirit with us.
 - d. The original serpent promised life but brought about death. Jesus goes through death, but gives life.
 - e. In Father John Behr's translation of John 3:16, Jesus says, 'God loved the world thusly, in this way, that he gave the Son.'
9. Why do people stay in the darkness, refusing Jesus?
10. Jesus says to Nicodemus, 'Their deeds were evil.'
 - a. Nicodemus is the most religiously 'upstanding' person in the Gospel of John. Yet Jesus is the most critical with him. Why do you think this is?
 - b. What evil was Nicodemus doing? Keep in mind that Nicodemus is the most senior religious person that Jesus interacts with in John's Gospel, and it's on this occasion that 'evil' is brought up the most forcefully. What makes Nicodemus' deeds evil?
11. Do you think Nicodemus comes into the light? Would you?