



## Lesson 4 – The Book of John – Chapter 3

October 22<sup>st</sup> , 2017

*John 3:1-2: Now 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.”*

As we start reading chapter 3 of the book of John, we find a man named Nicodemus coming to see Jesus by cover of night. As we previously learned in Chapter 2, Jesus’ ministry was already well underway and his fame was spreading because of the miracles he had been performing. This greatly disturbed the Jewish religious leaders for a number of reasons.

Verse 1 states that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were one of two groups of religious leaders in Israel at that time with the Sadducees being the other group. Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but he was also a member of the Great Sanhedrin. According to Wikipedia, the Sanhedrin was an assembly of 23 to 71 men appointed from these two groups in every city of the Land of Israel. The Great Sanhedrin had 71 members and was situated at Jerusalem. Their purpose was to serve as the supreme council of the Jewish people during Jesus’ time. There is some debate as to the extent of their authority but I would venture to guess it would be somewhat analogous to our Supreme Court.

Of course, being a member of the Great Sanhedrin would have made Nicodemus one of the most respected and powerful religious leaders at that time. Later on we find out just how unhappy the Pharisees and Sadducees were with Jesus. So, coming to see Jesus alone at night was a very risky thing for Nicodemus to do as it could cause trouble for him with the rest of the Sanhedrin since that visit could serve as an endorsement to the Jewish population of Jesus’ claims.

That being said, it appears Nicodemus was more interested in the truth than just the politics. As we find later in John 19, he would cautiously defend Jesus in his trial and then later be one who would help bury Jesus after his crucifixion.

You will also notice that Nicodemus addressed Jesus as “rabbi.” This is a title of respect for a Jewish scholar or teacher. So, being addressed as such from a member of the Sanhedrin would indicate the respect that Nicodemus had for Jesus.

**Take A Moment** to consider how you approach Jesus and God. Do you do it secretly so that others may not see or do you do it with boldness and confidence?

*John 3:3-5: <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, 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?”*

You’ll notice that Jesus doesn’t mince words here. He jumps straight to the most important matter at hand, how a person may achieve salvation. One commentator<sup>1</sup> has observed that the word translated here as “again” may also be translated as “from above.” John uses this word a total of 5 times in this book (3:3, 7; 3:31; 19:11, 23). Jesus’ context is clearly indicating he meant “from above” here but it seems that Nicodemus interpreted his meaning the other way. It may seem obvious to us that as Christians what Jesus meant but to Nicodemus as well as the rest of the world, this was a totally new concept.

In fact, this statement would most likely have been quite startling to Nicodemus. It was widely taught at this time that because the Jews were descended from Abraham they were automatically assured of Heaven. It's also reported that some Rabbis taught that Abraham stood watch at the gate of hell, just to make sure that none of his descendants accidentally wandered in there. So, for Jesus to tell Nicodemus that he wouldn't be going to Heaven unless he was born "from above" could be likened to someone suddenly finding out their great inheritance was gone and they were destitute.

**John 3:5-8:** <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, 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 its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Jesus clarifies what he meant by elaborating here. He starts by saying that you must not only be born through a physical birth (which is a given for all humans) but you must also be born of the Spirit to enter Heaven. Jesus is telling him that he has nothing because of birthright (being one of God's chosen people) rather his spirit must also be born (or reborn) to achieve eternal life.

Verse 6 may seem a little baffling at first glance with its talk about the wind. But, a look at the original text helps clear things up. The Greek word translated as "spirit" (small "s") in verse 6 is "pneuma". This same word is also used in verse 8 but it was translated as "wind". This Greek word actually means both "spirit" and "wind". So, you can see how the two verses are tied together by the wordplay that Jesus wove here between what is "from above" and the "wind".

**John 3:9-10:** <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Jesus statement here may seem to be a little harsh at first glance. It sounds almost like he's mocking Nicodemus. But, the bluntness of his reply was most likely necessary to shake Nicodemus from his self-perceived position of religious superiority. Frankly, it's very difficult for humans to learn from someone else if they have the perception that the other person is not on the same level as them. Being a Pharisee on the Great Sanhedrin, Nicodemus would likely think that he was completely knowledgeable about spiritual matters and above reproach.

**Take a moment** to consider. Has God ever had to shake you up to wake you up and get your attention?

**John 3:11-12:** <sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Now that Jesus has Nicodemus' full attention and has him questioning himself, he hits him with something to make him reflect more inwardly. Jesus is trying to get him into a frame of mind that will allow him to receive and accept what he needs to hear, just like hard ground needs to be tilled before it can receive the planted seed.

It is also important to note that the last occurrence of "you" in verse 11 and all four occurrences of "you" in verse 12 are penned in the plural sense. This means Jesus is referring to a much larger group than just Nicodemus himself such as maybe, the Sanhedrin.

**John 3:13-15:** <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Next, Jesus speaks somewhat cryptically of his future crucifixion. Why would Jesus not come right out and tell him exactly what would be happening in the future? We can only speculate. Nicodemus most likely had no clue as to exactly what Jesus meant but those of us reading this after all events have unfolded can clearly see to what Jesus is referring.

**John 3:16-21:** <sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Here we have the entire Gospel summed up in only 6 verses! Let’s take a few minutes to digest what Jesus says here.

1. God loves the world. He loves us so much that he sent his only Son to suffer and pay the penalty for *our* sins even while we were yet unrepentant of them! But Jesus is more than just a Son. We learned in John 1:1 that Jesus was with God at the beginning of all things. Not only that but Jesus IS God. So, when God sent Jesus to die for us, He literally wrapped His own heart in flesh to pay our penalty!
2. A common argument made by non-believers today is that they say, “I can’t believe a loving God would send someone to Hell.” Well, God doesn’t condemn us. If He really wanted to do that then why send His Son to suffer? We sealed our own fate when we rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden and condemned ourselves by disobeying the one thing we were told not to do. We’ve inherited that sinful nature ever since. God provided a way to rescue us from that nature.
3. Jesus finishes up with a future revelation. Even with the light revealed to the world, there will be those who reject it and instead choose to embrace and remain in the darkness because the light exposes their evil works. Now, no one, or at least very few, thinks that what they do is evil. We tend to disguise it with phrases such as “I have the right to live my life the way I want.” or “It’s the way the world works!” or “Who are you to say what’s right and wrong?” We humans have an amazing propensity for living in denial.

**Take a moment** to reflect. Is there anything hidden in your life covered with the darkness of denial for which you should confess and repent?

**John 3:22-24:** <sup>22</sup> After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. <sup>23</sup> John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized <sup>24</sup> (for John had not yet been put in prison).

Enter John the Baptist. Mark 1:2-3 tells us that John the Baptist was the fulfilling of a prophecy, <sup>2</sup> As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

We know from the book of Luke that John the Baptist was actually a relative of Jesus and he was born to a mother, Elizabeth, who was far past the age of being able to bear children.

So, John the Baptist was baptizing people and preparing them for Jesus’ coming. It’s interesting to note how we can find in Mark 1:9-11 that John actually baptized Jesus, <sup>10</sup> And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came down from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son with you I am well pleased.’”

**John 3:25-30:** <sup>25</sup> Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. <sup>26</sup> And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” <sup>27</sup> John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ <sup>29</sup> The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears

*him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease."*

One of John's disciples came to him and warned him that Jesus was baptizing people and everyone (which I assume also means John's disciples) were flocking to Jesus. Here is where we see the difference in the heart of John and the hearts of the religious leaders.

John clearly recognized his place and freely gave up his position to him who it rightfully belonged. However, when the Pharisees and Sadducees were confronted with the same knowledge, they plotted on how they could do away with Jesus. They justified this by arguing that Jesus was committing blasphemy by claiming to be the Son of God while not taking the time to consider that he might actually be the One who was promised.

**Take a moment** to reflect on your life. If you've accepted Christ and devoted your life to God, have you decreased so that He might increase? When things happen in your day is your first thought about how it might affect or benefit you or is it about how you might glorify God?

**John 3:31:** <sup>31</sup> *He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.*

Jesus makes a very important observation here. The way Jesus spoke was unlike anyone ever before him. The concepts he presented were foreign, un-earthly. This in itself was indicative that he was who he said he was. You'll notice that he repeats the phrase "*He who comes from above is above all*" but replaces "above" with "heaven." This is said to emphasize the point that God is in charge and not the other way around.

**John 3:32-36:** <sup>32</sup> *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. <sup>33</sup> Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. <sup>34</sup> For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. <sup>35</sup> The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. <sup>36</sup> Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

I can think of nothing more frustrating than speaking about things I've witnessed with my own eye to someone and they flat out refuse to believe me. I can't imagine the frustration that the human-side of Jesus felt at the disbelief he faced. It was so strong that they not only refused to believe him but killed him for it!

It was mentioned earlier that humans have a great proclivity for living in denial. This includes not only refusing to see our own faults but also refusing to accept other truths that we don't wish to accept or that we suspect are the ravings of someone else in denial or just flat out lying.

**Take A Moment** to consider how we can reach those who are lost and need to find Jesus.

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Hall Harris III, Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-exegetical-commentary-john-3>