

John 3:1-21
May 11, 2025

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: If someone came up to you and asked what it means to be born again, how would you explain that? [Let people engage]

Transition: Explaining the importance of being “born again” can be a challenging conversation if you are talking with people of a different culture, or to someone who doesn’t have any background in the Scriptures, or a different age group.

In today’s text, we see that Jesus cares about our spiritual condition. He stayed up late talking with Nicodemus about spiritual matters. As many of you probably already know, Nicodemus was an educated man who was a part of the highest level of Jewish leadership as a Pharisee. He truly believed he was “born into” the family of God through the lineage of Abraham. But Jesus is going to explain that Nicodemus needs to be “born again” to be a part of the family of God, which throws him! So Jesus is going to walk us through the basics of salvation, using four different illustrations. Let’s begin.

BOOK:

Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. (or born from above)”

⁴ “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You (plural) must be born again.’

⁸ The 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?

¹¹ I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. (who is in heaven)

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰

Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What stood out to you? What questions do you have? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about man? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit? [Let people engage]

Q: What is your takeaway? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

There are many people in our world today who could be a “Nicodemus.” There are people who believe they are morally upright, religious, sincere, and a good person. They believe that if they only do enough good deeds, public service, or attend church enough, or take Holy Communion regularly, that they’ll be right with God when it comes to their deaths. But as we learned today, Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus turns that on its head. Salvation comes through Jesus alone. We must pray to Jesus and as tell Him that we accept Him as our Lord and Savior through seeking forgiveness for our sins and acknowledging Him as the Son of God who came to earth to die for us.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 294-297). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.*

Jesus Christ the Teacher (John 3:1–21)

We have already noted the connection between John 2:23–25 and 3:1. Nicodemus was initially attracted to Jesus because of the miracles He did. He wanted to know more about Jesus and the doctrines that He taught. Nicodemus himself was “*the* teacher of the Jews” (John 3:10, literal translation) and he had great respect for the Teacher from Galilee.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which meant he lived by the strictest possible religious rules. Not all of the Pharisees were hypocrites (as one may infer from Jesus’ comments recorded in Matt. 23), and evidence indicates that Nicodemus was deeply sincere in his quest for truth. He came to Jesus by night, not because he was afraid of being seen, but most likely because he wanted to have a quiet uninterrupted conversation with the new Teacher “come from God.” The fact that Nicodemus used the plural pronoun “we,” and Jesus responded with the plural “ye” (John 3:7) may indicate that Nicodemus was representing the religious leaders. He was a man of high moral character, deep religious hunger, and yet profound spiritual blindness. In order to instruct Nicodemus in the basics of salvation, our Lord used four quite different illustrations.

Birth (vv. 1–7). Our Lord began with that which was familiar, birth being a universal experience. The word translated “again” also means “from above.” Though all human beings have experienced natural birth on earth, if they expect to go to heaven, they must experience a supernatural spiritual birth from above.

Once again, we meet with the blindness of sinners: this well-educated religious leader, Nicodemus, did not understand what the Savior was talking about! Jesus was speaking about a spiritual birth, but Nicodemus thought only of a physical birth. The situation is no different today. When you talk with people about being born again, they often begin to discuss their family’s religious heritage, their church membership, religious ceremonies, and so on. Being a patient teacher, our Lord picked up on Nicodemus’ words and further explained the new birth. To be “born of water” is to be born physically (“enter a second time into his mother’s womb”) but to be born again means to be born of the Spirit. Just as there are two parents for physical birth, so there are two “parents” for spiritual birth: the Spirit of God (John 3:5) and the Word of God (James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and, when the sinner believes, imparts the life of God.

Jesus was not teaching that the new birth comes through water baptism. In the New Testament, baptism is connected with *death*, not birth; and no amount of physical water can effect a spiritual change in a person. The emphasis in John 3:14–21 is on *believing*, because salvation comes through faith (Eph. 2:8–9). The evidence of salvation is the witness of the Spirit within (Rom. 8:9), and the Spirit enters your life when you believe (Acts 10:43–48; Eph. 1:13–14). Water baptism is certainly a part of our obedience to Christ and our witness for Christ (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 2:41). But it must not be made an essential for salvation; otherwise, none of the Old Testament saints was ever saved, nor was the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39–43). In every

age, there has been but one way of salvation—faith in God’s promise—though the *outward evidence* of that faith has changed from age to age.

Human birth involves travail (John 16:21), and so does the birth from above. Our Savior had to travail on the cross so that we might become members of the family of God (Isa. 53:11). Concerned believers have to travail in prayer and witness as they seek to lead sinners to Christ (1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19). The child inherits the nature of the parents, and so does the child of God. We become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Nature determines appetite, which explains why the Christian has an appetite for the things of God (1 Peter 2:2–3). He has no desire to go back to the foul things of the world that once appealed to him (2 Peter 2:20–22). He feeds on the Word of God and grows into spiritual maturity (Heb. 5:11–14).

Of course, birth involves life; and spiritual birth from above involves *God’s* life. John uses the word *life* thirty-six times in his Gospel. The opposite of life is death, and the person who has not believed on Jesus Christ does not have God’s life, eternal life, abundant life. *You do not manufacture Christians any more than you manufacture babies!* The only way to enter God’s family is through the new birth (John 1:11–13).

Birth involves a future, and we are “born again to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3, NASB). A newborn baby cannot be arrested because he or she has no past! When you are born again into God’s family, your sins are forgiven and forgotten, and your future is bright with a living hope. Nicodemus must have had a surprised and yet bewildered look on his face, for the Lord had to say, “You must not be surprised that I told you that all of you must be born again” (John 3:7, Phillips). But Nicodemus was born a Jew! He was a part of God’s covenant people! (Rom. 9:4–5) Certainly his birth was better than that of a Gentile or a Samaritan! And his life was exemplary, for he was a faithful Pharisee! He could well understand Jesus telling the *Romans* that they had to be born again, but certainly not the *Jews*!

The wind (vv. 8–13). It is likely that the evening wind was blowing just then as Nicodemus and Jesus sat on the housetop conversing. The word *wind* in both Hebrew and Greek can also be translated “spirit.” One of the symbols of the Spirit of God in the Bible is the wind or breath (Job 33:4; John 20:22; Acts 2:2). Like the wind, the Spirit is invisible but powerful; and you cannot explain or predict the movements of the wind.

When Jesus used this symbol, Nicodemus should have readily remembered Ezekiel 37:1–14. The prophet saw a valley full of dead bones; but when he prophesied to the wind, the Spirit came and gave the bones life. Again, it was the combination of the Spirit of God and the Word of God that gave life. The nation of Israel (including Nicodemus and his fellow council members) was dead and hopeless; but in spite of the morality and religion of the people, they needed the life of the Spirit.

The new birth from above is a necessity (“Ye must be born again”), but it is also a mystery. Everyone who is born of the Spirit is like the wind: you cannot fully explain or predict either the wind or the child of God! For that matter, human birth is still a mystery, in spite of all that we know about anatomy and physiology. Each new life is exciting and different.

Nicodemus came “by night,” and he was still in the dark! He could not understand the new birth even after Jesus had explained it to him. Our Lord stated clearly that Nicodemus’ knowledge of the Old Testament should have given him the light he needed (John 3:10). Alas, “the teacher of the Jews” knew the *facts* recorded in the Scriptures, but he could not understand the *truths*. What was the problem? For one thing, the religious leaders would not submit to the authority of Christ’s witness (John 3:11). We will see this “authority conflict” increase as we continue in our studies. The religious leaders claimed to believe Moses, yet they could not believe Jesus (John 5:37–47). The Pharisees were more concerned about the praise of men than the praise of God (John 12:37–50).

“I have used earthly illustrations,” said Jesus, “and you cannot understand. If I began to share the deep spiritual truths, you still would not believe” (John 3:12).

The serpent on the pole (vv. 14–18). The story in Numbers 21:4–9 was certainly familiar to Nicodemus. It is a story of sin, for the nation rebelled against God and had to be punished. God sent fiery serpents that bit the people so that many died. It is also a story of grace, for Moses interceded for the people and God provided a remedy. He told Moses to make a brass serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see. Any stricken person who looked at the serpent would immediately be healed. So, it is also a story of faith: when the people looked by faith, they were saved.

The verb *lifted up* has a dual meaning: to be crucified (John 8:28; 12:32–34) and to be glorified and exalted. In his Gospel, John points out that our Lord’s crucifixion was actually the means of His glorification (John 12:23ff). The cross was not the end of His glory; it was the means of His glory (Acts 2:33).

Much as the serpent was lifted up on that pole, so the Son of God would be lifted up on a cross. Why? To save us from sin and death. In the camp of Israel, the solution to the “serpent problem” was not in killing the serpents, making medicine, pretending they were not there, passing anti-serpent laws, or climbing the pole. The answer was in looking by faith at the uplifted serpent. The whole world has been bitten by sin, and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). God sent His Son to die, not only for Israel, but for a whole world. How is a person born from above? How is he or she saved from eternal perishing? By believing on Jesus Christ; by looking to Him in faith.

The difference between perishing and living, and between condemnation and salvation, is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus could well have come to this world as a Judge and destroyed every rebellious sinner; but in love, He came to this world as our Savior, *and He died for us on the cross!* He became the “uplifted serpent.” The serpent in Moses’ day brought physical life to dying Jews; but Jesus Christ gives eternal life to anyone who trusts Him. He has salvation for a whole world!

Light and darkness (vv. 19–21). This is one of the major images used in this Gospel (John 1:4–13). Why will sinners not come into the “light of life”? Because they love the darkness! They want to persist in their evil deeds, and this keeps them from coming to the light; for the closer the sinner gets to the light, the more his sins are exposed. It is not “intellectual problems” that keep people from trusting Christ; it is the moral and spiritual blindness that keeps them loving the darkness and hating the light.

note that Nicodemus finally did “come to the light.” He was in the “midnight of confusion” (John 3:1–21), but eventually he came out into the “sunlight of confession” when he identified with Christ at Calvary (John 19:38–42). He realized that the uplifted Savior was indeed the Son of God.

Blum, E. A. (1985). *John*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 280-282) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

3:1. **Nicodemus** represented the best in the nation. He was a teacher (v. 10), a Pharisee, and a **member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council**. The Sanhedrin had 70 members who were responsible for religious decisions and also, under the Romans, for civil rule. Two Sanhedrin members who appear in a favorable light in the New Testament are Joseph of Arimathea (19:38) and the Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5:34–39; 22:3). The Sanhedrin put Jesus on trial (Luke 22:66). Nicodemus later rebuked the Pharisees for condemning Jesus without hearing Him (John 7:50–51), and he helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus (19:39–40).

3:2. Why did Nicodemus go **to Jesus at night**? Because of fear? Because it was the normal time for visits? Because he wanted a time of uninterrupted conversation without the distractions of the ever-present crowds? John did not say why. And yet nighttime has a sinister tone in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 19:39). Nicodemus began, **Rabbi, we know You are a Teacher who has come from God**. “We” probably means the favorable ones on the council. The titles “Rabbi” and “Teacher” are polite and flattering on one hand, but they showed Nicodemus’ inadequate comprehension of who Jesus is. The words “from God” are in an emphatic position in the Greek. The **signs** had pointed out Jesus as God’s Man (**God** was **with Him**), and Nicodemus wanted to talk to Him as one Rabbi to another.

3:3. But **Jesus** was not on the same level with Nicodemus. He is “from above” (*anōthen*; v. 31); therefore, Nicodemus must be born “from above” (v. 3, NIV; *anōthen*). To be **born again** or born “from above” (*anōthen* has both meanings; e.g., “from above” in 19:11 and “again” in Gal. 4:9) is to have a spiritual transformation which takes a person out of the kingdom of darkness into **the kingdom of God** (cf. Col. 1:13). The kingdom is the sphere or realm of God’s authority and blessing which is now invisible but will be manifested on earth (Matt. 6:10).

3:4. **Nicodemus** was certain Jesus did not mean something absurd (such as a reincarnation or a **second** physical birth), but yet he did not grasp the nature of regeneration.

3:5. Various views are given to explain Jesus’ words about being **born of water and the Spirit**:

- (1) The “water” refers to the natural birth, and the “Spirit” to the birth from above.
- (2) The “water” refers to the Word of God (Eph. 5:26).
- (3) The “water” refers to baptism as an essential part of regeneration. (This view contradicts other Bible verses that make it clear that salvation is by faith alone; e.g., John 3:16, 36; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5.)
- (4) The “water” is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39).

(5) The “water” refers to the repentance ministry of John the Baptist, and the “Spirit” refers to the application by the Holy Spirit of Christ to an individual.

The fifth view has the merit of historical propriety as well as theological acceptability. John the Baptist had stirred the nation by his ministry and stress on repentance (Matt. 3:1–6). “Water” would remind Nicodemus of the Baptist’s emphasis. So Jesus was saying that Nicodemus, in order to **enter the kingdom**, needed to turn to Him (repent) in order to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

3:6–7. There are two distinct realms: one is of fallen man (the **flesh**) and the other is of God (**the Spirit**). A fallen person cannot regenerate himself; he needs a divine operation. Only God’s Holy Spirit can regenerate a human spirit. People should not stumble at or reject the importance of Jesus’ words. They **must be born** from above. The necessity is absolute and is universally binding.

3:8. This verse contains a wordplay which cannot be adequately expressed in English. The Greek word *pneuma* means both wind and Spirit. The work of **the Spirit** (*pneuma*) is invisible and mysterious like the blowing of **the wind** (*pneuma*). Man controls neither.

3:9–10. **Nicodemus asked ... how** this spiritual transformation takes place. **Jesus** answered that Nicodemus, as the **teacher** of Israel (the Gr. has the article “the”), ought to know. The Old Testament prophets spoke of the new Age with its working of the Spirit (Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–29). The nation’s outstanding teacher ought to **understand** how God by His sovereign grace can give someone a new heart (1 Sam. 10:6; Jer. 31:33).

3:11. But Nicodemus was ignorant of the realm of which Jesus spoke. He represented the nation’s unbelief and lack of knowledge. Jesus, like the prophets, spoke to the nation about divine themes but the Jews rejected His witness. “Witness” (or **testimony**; *martyrian*) is a common word in John’s Gospel (see the chart at 5:33–34).

3:12. Since Nicodemus could not grasp the basic teaching of regeneration which Jesus presented in **earthly** analogies, how could he understand and **believe** the more abstract **heavenly** matters such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Jesus’ coming glorification?

3:13. **No one has ever gone into heaven** and then come back to earth, able to give clear teaching about divine matters. The one exception is Jesus who is **the Son of Man** (cf. 1:50–51; Dan. 7:13; Matt. 26:64). He is the “Ladder” between heaven and earth with access to both realms (cf. comments on John 1:50–51). He “descended” in the Incarnation and “ascended” in the Ascension. He also was in **heaven** before the Incarnation, and therefore knows the divine mysteries.

3:14–15. The thought of elevation to heaven (v. 13) leads to the thought of Jesus being **lifted up** (cf. 8:28; 12:32). **Moses** raised a bronze **snake** on a pole as a cure for a punishment due to disobedience (cf. Num. 21:4–9). **So** Jesus would **be lifted up** on a cross for people’s sin, so **that** a look of faith gives **eternal life** to those doomed to die.

3:16. Whether this verse was spoken by John or Jesus, it is God's Word and is an important summary of the gospel. God's motivation toward people is love. God's love is not limited to a few or to one group of people, but His gift is for **the whole world**. God's love was expressed in the giving of His most priceless gift—**His unique Son** (cf. Rom. 8:3, 32). The Greek word translated **one and only**, referring to the Son, is *monogenē*, which means “only begotten,” or “only born-one.” It is also used in John 1:14, 18; 3:18; and 1 John 4:9. On man's side, the gift is simply to be received, not earned (John 1:12–13). A person is saved by believing, by trusting in Christ. **Perish** (*apolētai*) means not annihilation but rather a final destiny of “ruin” in hell apart from God who is life, truth, and joy. **Eternal life** is a new quality of life, which a believer has now as a present possession and will possess forever (cf. 10:28; 17:3).

3:17. Though light casts shadows, its purpose is to illuminate. Though those who do not believe are condemned, God's purpose in sending **His Son** is salvation (**to save**), not damnation (**to condemn**). **God** does **not** delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23, 32). He desires that everyone be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

3:18. The instrumental means of salvation is believing in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. But people who reject the light of the *Logos* are in the dark (1:5; 8:12) and are therefore **already** under God's judgment. They stand **condemned**. They are like those sinful, dying Israelites who willfully rejected the divine remedy (Num. 21:4–9). A believer in Christ, on the other hand, is under “no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1); he “will not be condemned” (John 5:24).

3:19. **Men** love **darkness** not for its own sake but because of what it hides. They want to continue undisturbed in their **evil** (*ponēra*, “wicked”; cf. v. 20 which has a different word for evil) **deeds**. A believer is also a sinner (though a redeemed one), but he confesses his sin and responds to God (cf. 1 John 1:6–7). In the ultimate sense, man's love of darkness rather than God the **Light** (John 1:5, 10–11; 1 John 1:5) is his love for idols. He worships and serves “created things rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25).

3:20. Just as natural light shows up what is otherwise unseen, so Christ **the Light** exposes people's deeds as “evil.” (The word “evil” here is *phaula* [“worthless”], also used by John in 5:29.) Unbelievers have no ultimate meaning of life, no worthy motivation, no adequate goal, and a destiny of doom. Yet **everyone who does evil hates the light** (as well as loves darkness, 3:19). He fears that if he comes to the light **his deeds will be** seen as worthless, and he would need to turn from them.

3:21. Jesus is like a magnet. His people are drawn to Him and welcome His revelation. Though **the light** rebukes their sin, they respond in repentance and faith. They live **by the truth** (cf. 2 John 1–2, 4; 3 John 1, 4). By regeneration they live differently than their former lives of darkness. Their new lives are by faith in Jesus and His Word. And the Spirit, working in their lives, gives them new power, goals, and interests (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10).

White, J. E. (1998). *John*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (pp. 468-469). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

God's Saving Love (3:1–21)

There can be little doubt that this section in John's Gospel is the most renowned in all of Scripture, with verse 16 serving as the most familiar single verse in all of the Bible. There is good reason for this, for John 3:16 presents the clearest, simplest statement of the good news Christ came to bring to the world. What is that good news? First, that God loves you. Second, that God's love was so great that He sent His only Son to tell the world about God's love. Third, that anyone who will believe in God's Son will never die but will live forever with God. Belief, of course, means far more than mere intellectual assent. Rather, it means placing one's life and trust in complete surrender to the one in whom you believe.

The heart of Jesus' message to Nicodemus is that men and women, in order to come to God in faith, must be "born again." This is not optional, according to Jesus, but a necessity. By this Jesus meant being "born of the Spirit." The reference to "water and the Spirit" has many possible interpretations, such as (1) water referring to purification; (2) synonymous with "born of the Spirit"; (3) baptism, either John's or Christ's. The latter of these three interpretations, that baptism is necessary for salvation, is the least desired understanding (Eph. 2:8–9). To be considered as well is that the Greek manuscript does not have an article ("the") with the word "Spirit"; therefore, it would be grammatically incorrect to separate Spirit from water. What is to be maintained is that to be "born again" is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit as a result of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. To be born again is to become a member of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, initiated by repentance and the desire to lead a new life to the honor and glory of Christ (1 Pet. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:17). Jesus' purpose was never to condemn the world, for that is something we do to ourselves through our own willful choice to reject Christ, but rather Jesus' purpose was to save the world.

Allen, J. P. (1972). *John*. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The Teacher's Bible Commentary* (pp. 668-670). Broadman and Holman Publishers.

A New Kind of Birth (John 3:1–36)

The passage—The last word in the preceding chapter leads to the first sentence of this famous section of John- "man." Jesus knew the nature of men. They were easily impressed by miraculous works, but likely to miss the deeper issues of faith. So, he did not lightly trust himself and the secrets of his kingdom to them, "for he knew what was in man" (2:25). But, "There was a man" (v. 1)—and with this man Jesus did open the mysteries of the new birth. John now uses the interview with Nicodemus to show how a new kind of kingdom demands a new kind of birth.

Special points—Since Nicodemus was a Pharisee the story assumes more importance. He sat on the highest court of the Jews, but he recognized God at work when he observed Jesus' signs. He was spiritually sensitive even though his training was largely legalistic. Word had come to the Sanhedrin concerning certain miracles Jesus performed. Most called it trickery. Nicodemus felt these were impossible for any man "except God be with him" (v. 2). So, the signs accomplish their purpose. Nicodemus was moved to seek out the new teacher.

That he came "by night" has caused some to suggest cowardice. It is more likely that it was wise caution, since he was only in the seeking stage. He was not ready to openly accept the teachings of Jesus. That he did so gradually, and without fear, is indicated by further references in 7:50 and 19:39.

Jesus answered Nicodemus' unspoken question. He knew what the young lawyer wanted to know. In essence Jesus responded something like this. "Now listen to me (the "verily, verily" in verse 2 is John's usual expression of force). You sense that I am from God, and you are right. And I have not come to teach or renew the old Mosaic system. Instead, I will make possible a radical new relationship with the Father that does not depend on race or natural birth. It will be such a realm as not to be recognized from outside. You will have to enter it by a personal experience so drastic that it can only be called being born again. Only then can you see it." No wonder Nicodemus was puzzled. His deepest conviction was that men were in God's kingdom when they were from Abraham. The new idea startled him. He could only murmur, "How can these things be?" (v. 9).

Jesus tried to aid his faith by illustration (v. 6). Flesh and spirit are in obvious contrast. And the spirit is the higher order. Nicodemus knew that there were spiritual factors which could not be experienced by the fleshly body. So, then, there were also other realms that required spiritual perception, Jesus told him. So he would have to come alive to heavenly realities through faith (v. 12). It was what God had always wanted, as he could understand if he remembered the salvation of Israel in the wilderness (v. 14).

Most of all, the new relationship with God would be through a new sacrifice (v. 16–18). One wonders if Nicodemus did not see this clearly in the years following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Truth for today—It is plain that God desires a relationship, not mere obedience to commandments. Like a father, he wants a loving trust, not fear. When any person exercises that faith in Christ, the resulting life can only be described as having come from "being born all over again."

Perhaps the concluding part of this chapter should suggest a related truth. After birth, comes growth and maturity. That is as much a part of God's plan as is the first step of spiritual rebirth. John the Baptist reflected that maturity when he was able to conquer the jealousy others suggested to him in Jesus' popularity (v. 26). It takes a man, not an infant, to say, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30).

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). John 3:1-21. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.