

John 3:1-21

I don't think I've mentioned it yet, but if you're serious about studying the Gospel of John, there are a number (vast... very, very vast) of resources you might consider using. Here are the three that I'm using in preparing our studies (and sermons).

- [The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John](#) by Morris.
- [The Gospel and Letters of John](#) by Culpepper
- [Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel](#) by Koester
- [St. John's Gospel](#) by Lenski

Last week, we looked at the second half of John 2, where we saw that Jesus is our only atoning sacrifice for sin, how he had compassion on the poor and authority over the powerful and corrupt. Jesus also pointed forward to the final sign he would give for proof of his identity (as the one who has the authority to do what he did in the temple): his death and resurrection. John introduces this future event here and it becomes something to which the rest of his gospel focuses.

Still in Jerusalem, we arrive at the Third Chapter, where we are introduced to a man, Nicodemus and the necessity of being born anew.

3:1

The name Nicodemus means: "conqueror of the people." Not only is his name significant (again, John LOVES his names!), but so are the details John give us about this man: he is a man of the Pharisees (strict obedience to the Law, belief in the resurrection, miracles, the supernatural, and the final judgment), and a ruler of the Jews (not just a respected neighbor, as many-a-Pharisee would have been, Nicodemus wields power). It's hard to imagine someone, aside from nobility, having more influence and position than Nicodemus. After looking out for the poor in the previous passage by coming down hard on the sellers of pigeons in the Temple, Jesus now turns his attention to someone who wants for nothing, setting the stage for what is revealed in 3:16.

3:2

Lots is made of the timing of Nicodemus' visit with Jesus: "at night." Since nothing is accidentally written in John's gospel, there IS meaning to this period of time. However, it is my belief that many people err in saying that, because Nicodemus came at night he was afraid people would otherwise find out that he was interested in Jesus. He wanted to keep his interest in Jesus under the radar, these people say. I disagree for several reasons:

1. Jesus is not unpopular yet. (Wait until Chapters 6-8.)

2. Other Pharisees, etc have no problem being in the same area as Jesus (again, see 6-8).
3. He says in this verse that “we” know Jesus is a teacher sent from God. Why would it be embarrassing for Nicodemus to be seen hanging out with a teacher from God by people who believe the same thing? Jesus would be the very person you’d WANT to be seen hanging out with!

So why does John tell us that Nicodemus came to Jesus “at night”? Several possible reasons...

1. John loves playing with light-dark. The time of day might not matter in and of itself; John includes it only to elude to the spiritual condition of a respected ruler... darkness.
2. Nicodemus respected Jesus’ time. Either he or Jesus would have been too busy during the day to arrange a meeting. This is the only time that would work.
3. When do you usually have company over? Exactly!

Even though he comes to Jesus “at night” (signifying spiritual darkness), Nicodemus gets several things right:

1. Jesus IS “Rabbi” (only much moreso).
2. Jesus has come from God (one of the most important facts about Jesus that John wants to impress on you in his gospel).
3. No one can do the signs Jesus is doing except... Jesus. (Notice “signs”, yet John has only recorded one. Jesus did “many other signs that are not recorded in this book...”)

3:3

Only in this discourse does Jesus speak about the Kingdom of God. This is a theme that the Synoptic Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) focus on with great intensity. John is not as concerned about it as they are.

There is no word that can be directly translated as “again” in Greek. “Anew” or “from above” are more accurate translations, but leave a little too much to the imagination. (What does it mean to be born “from above”? Born “anew”? Say what?)

Jesus picks the one thing in life we had nothing to do with, but that is the most important thing that’s happened to us: our birth. He says that, in order to “see” the kingdom of God (we’ll talk about what that means later), something has to happen to you that you have nothing to do with... and it’s important. Very important. I cannot “born” myself again, it has to happen to me. This is the work of God.

Now, “see the kingdom of God.” Since “kingdom” talk in John’s gospel is sparse... very sparse... we don’t have a solid context to play around with, and so our conclusions as to what this phrase means will be limited and tenuous. The first question we have to ask is: how much can I “outsource” my

understanding of “kingdom” to the Synoptic gospels, where “kingdom” talk runs rampant? (My personal answer would be not to do it, unless we absolutely cannot make heads or tails of this phrase from within John.) Based on what we’ve already read in John, faith in Jesus comes from SEEING the miracles he does. (We don’t know what about the miracles you need to SEE in order to believe... but if you jump ahead to the later parts of the Gospel, you’ll see that it has to do with Jesus being sent from the Father and doing the works of the Father.) SEEING the Kingdom of God, therefore, is believing that Jesus acts on God’s behalf, represents God, and is from God.

3:4

Nicodemus demonstrates that he is in darkness.

However, one could hardly expect that he would understand what Jesus just said. Jesus intentionally spoke in riddle to him, setting up his longer monologue, which is coming...

3:5

As good Lutherans, we want to jump all over this passage with baptismal theology. Not. So. Fast. Baptism has not been instituted yet. Therefore, it would be impossible for anyone to “enter” the kingdom of God at this point. And yet, John has already told us that the disciples “believed” in Jesus. And if this IS talking about baptism, then it would be impossible for anyone to come to faith in Jesus without baptism (something unsubstantiated throughout the rest of Scripture) and make baptism a pre-requisite for faith. (Making adult catechesis an empty hoop and meaningless exercise.)

Without getting into too much detail (see Morris’ commentary for that), what Jesus is most likely saying is that in order to enter the kingdom of God, one not only has to be born (water indicating a natural human birth), but must also be born anew (or from above). This second birth can only be done by the Spirit. It is not something we can do to or for ourselves.

Now, getting back to baptism. Baptism would be one way (as a means of grace) where the Spirit would work to bring someone to faith and deliver the goods Jesus has for them, which he won in his death and resurrection. And so while “water and Spirit” do not immediately force us into baptism as a requirement for salvation, we acknowledge that being born anew by the Spirit does take place in baptism.

3:6

Jesus explains that the two-births do not look the same. One is physical: you come from your mother. One is spiritual: done by the Spirit; you cannot see it. Remember, this is Jesus’ answer to the question Nicodemus asked, about returning to his mother’s womb. “No, not THAT KIND of birth,” Jesus appears to be saying. The aspect of “birth” that Jesus focuses on is that it is something that you cannot do to or for yourself, not the physical process or location.

3:7

Easier said than done. I think Jesus means two things here:

1. Relax, Nicodemus. You've been trying to do everything by the Law. Everything from God to you is a command; things you MUST do. I'm not giving you a new Law, or something you have to do. I'm telling you the way things are.
2. You might not understand what I'm telling you. That's OK. Don't lose any sleep over it. You'll figure it out 😊 Keep reading!!!

3:8

The being-born-again process is not one we can control; it is like the wind. Just one more proof-text that Jesus is talking about the work of God to save people.

God is absolutely free to save whomever he wants. Why is this a good thing... and only a good thing?

3:9

Darkness.

And an opportunity is created for Jesus to do more teaching!

(Do you find yourself thinking what Nicodemus is saying? That's not accidental.)

3:10

The answer is: YES! Nicodemus is the best of the best, yet not even he knows about which Jesus speaks. John is taking us in the direction of seeing Jesus (and Jesus alone) as coming from the Father and speaking on the Father's behalf. Other Rabbis or respected teachers are not different variations of the same theme; they are in darkness. It's Jesus, and only Jesus, who has the truth and light that we need.

3:11

Who is the "we"?

Jesus COULD be speaking in the "royal we", but since he does not do this elsewhere in the gospel, we should not draw this conclusion before examining other possible alternatives.

The only other person who has done any teaching in John's gospel is John the Baptist. If there is another person implied, and I believe that there is, it is John. (Remember, he is the one the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to question (1:19); Nicodemus could have been one of the group of "Jews" who did this.) What this does is connect Jesus and John together; their message is unified! (Other support for this is that the next passage has to do with John the Baptist.)

3:12

What Jesus has talked about so far has to do with human beings. If Nicodemus doesn't understand this, what good will it be for Jesus to talk about things not of this world?

How many people today want answers to “heavenly” questions, but don’t understand the very “earthly” teachings of Jesus? “What’s so-and-so doing in heaven?” is not the right question to be asking when there is a failure to see Jesus as doing the will of the Father and being sent from the Father, or when life is not lived with faith in Christ and love for one’s neighbor as the goal. You have to get your high school diploma long before working towards a Ph.D.

3:13

An unfortunate translation is given in the NIV and ESV. Much better is what is found in a number of manuscripts (and some English translations): “No one has ever ascended into heaven except he who is in heaven, the Son of Man.” The point of this is that Jesus is both talking with Nicodemus AND in the presence of the Father at the same time. Jesus never left heaven to come to earth. The one who came to make his Father known never left his Father’s side.

This teaching reinforces what Jesus said in the previous verses: only his message is true; there is no other message than the one John and Jesus have.

3:14-15

Jesus finally teaches what it means to be born anew (or from above). John assumes that his reader has some knowledge of the Old Testament and the story of Moses and the fiery serpents. (Numbers 21:8-9) Being born anew is not a work of man, it is the gift of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

3:16

It’s here that the commentaries mention that there is no punctuation in Greek. This means we don’t know when Jesus stops speaking and the narrator (John) kicks in with his commentary on what Jesus has just said. That the death of Jesus is referred to in the past tense (after it is referred to as being a future event in the previous verse) makes me believe that, while possible, it is more probable that Jesus did NOT speak these words; they are the comments of the narrator. And, in providing this comment on what Jesus has just said, John is teaching us that it was out of love for THE WHOLE WORLD that God sent his son and had him “lifted up.”

This verse answers the question: who does God want to be “born anew”? Answer: the WHOLE WORLD! If he did not want this (as we’ll see in 3:17), why would he send his son into the world and have him lifted up?

3:17

The reason why the Father sent Jesus was not to judge the world (as many throughout the history of the Christian Church believed, leading to a number of heretical practices that continue to this day), but to SAVE the world! (Save the world FROM WHAT? Darkness? Death? John does not say at this point. And neither will we.)

The fact that God sent his son to save ALL PEOPLE implies that ALL PEOPLE are under some kind of control or captivity from which they cannot free themselves. Jesus will elaborate more on this in the coming chapters (especially in his debate/ argument with the Jews in 6-8). The Gospel is GOOD NEWS, not a new command. It is the work of God to create new birth, bring life and light, and save!

3:18

Unbelief is the natural condition of people. It is only by the power of God that faith is created and new life is given. This verse cuts down an notion that salvation is something a person has to earn based on “good works” or jumping through a system of divinely inspired hoops. Belief in the Son of God is the only criteria upon which salvation rests. Again, people are BY NATURE unbelievers; faith comes as a gift of God.

3:19

The harsh reality, John teaches, is that people would rather live in unbelief than in faith in Christ. Why? Because if I deny Christ and live in a worldview of my choosing (or one that has been created by someone else many years ago), I will either arrive at the conclusion that, in my current form, I am good enough to attain whatever the substance of “salvation” is that I believe exists, or that I CAN BECOME good enough to earn the same.

If I can live “in darkness” than it will never be revealed to me (or to anyone else) that I am, by nature, sinful and unclean. In my own sinful nature, I’d rather wallow around in my own sin and weakness than admit I need to be SAVED from myself and see my salvation outside of myself in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

3:20-21

Take these two verses together.

On the one hand, those who do what is wicked (not defined here) want to remain the shadows and not come into the light (fellowship with Jesus). On the other hand, those who do what is the opposite of wicked (“true”) come into the light (fellowship with Jesus). From the context, what is wicked is rejection of Jesus. Those who reject Jesus remain in darkness. Those who do not reject Jesus do what is TRUE and are those whom God has saved (or caused to be “born anew”).

It’s easy to take these verses in the direction of “works righteousness,” but keeping oneself in the boundaries established by the CONTEXT will not allow something like this to happen. These verses are not a new teaching. But, as John loves to do, are a restatement of what has already been said... from a different angle.