



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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John 3:1-10 Commentary **New American Standard Bible**

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study Commentary](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Study Forum](#).

(John 3:1) Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;

The Pharisees were committed to following the law and traditions of their elders. They focused on learning all the biblical interpretations of their teachers (rabbis) past and present and how to apply them in people's daily lives. They debated the teachings of their rabbis, what was true or false in their interpretations, and how they should best be applied. The Jewish ruling council was the Sanhedrin, which was composed of seventy rabbis or elders; thus, Nicodemus was one of the most influential people in Israel. The Pharisees would not have been too concerned about Jesus' cleansing the temple, because they knew from the scriptures and their traditions that the temple needed cleansing. On the other hand, the Sadducees controlled the Sanhedrin, and they would have been the most concerned. Nicodemus represents the Old Covenant and the idea that one could be right with God if he obeyed the ceremonial laws and the traditions of the elders as these had been revised continually by the Pharisees. Later, Nicodemus is mentioned twice in John's Gospel: in John 7:50-51, we read, "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 'Our law

does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” and in John 19:39, we read, “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” Therefore, we know Nicodemus tried to defend Jesus before the Sanhedrin; he became a quiet follower of Jesus.

(John 3:2) 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.”

Nicodemus may have come to Jesus by night because he was timid or because he wanted time for a quiet lengthy discussion with Jesus away from the crowds. He addressed Jesus with respect as “Rabbi” or “Teacher,” even though he knew Jesus had no officially recognized formal rabbinical education. We do not know how many religious leaders Nicodemus represented when he said “we.” He did say that the signs Jesus performed were good and sufficient reasons to believe that Jesus had come from God: the signs left no doubt that God was with Jesus. Perhaps Nicodemus admired Jesus for cleansing the temple; so, he wanted to learn more from someone he knew had come from God and who had zeal for God. Later, when they sought Jesus’ death, most of the religious leaders suppressed the truths they had learned about Jesus and their having seen the power of God working through Him. In Romans 1:18, we learn that wicked and godless people suppress the truth, and these religious leaders were both wicked and godless: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

(John 3:3) Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John tells us the most important points in their discussion. The Greek “Amen, amen” can be translated “verily, verily” or “very truly” or “truly, truly” or “factually, factually” or “with absolute certainty.” Jesus (and Paul) insisted that focusing on religious laws, studying religious laws and traditions, and doing good works based on these laws would not lead to

recognizing or seeing or entering the kingdom of God. More than what we can think and do ourselves is needed; we need what only God can do for us to see the kingdom of God. We must be born again, born anew, or born from above. We must be transformed spiritually and morally. Only Jesus can make that change in us: just as only Jesus could instantaneously change water into wine. God must remake us and enable us to see and enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was a noted religious teacher, but he too must be born again to see and enter the kingdom of God. In John 1:12, we read, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” In 2 Corinthians 5:17, the Apostle Paul described the new birth in these words: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” When we are born again, we become children of God.

In Romans 14:17, the Apostle Paul described the kingdom of God: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” As Nicodemus eventually learned, only through receiving and believing in Jesus Christ can anyone live right with God, have their conscience cleansed, receive confirmation that they are right with God, and know they will live right with God forever. Only through receiving and believing in Jesus Christ can anyone have peace with God, acquire peace within themselves, and live at peace with others (as far as possible in this world). Only through receiving and believing in Jesus Christ can anyone experience the joy of living that only the Holy Spirit can give, for only Jesus Christ baptizes people in the Holy Spirit (see John 1:33). No other faith or religion can give what only Jesus Christ can give; that is, entrance into the kingdom of God as the Bible describes what living in the kingdom of God means to believers.

(John 3:4) 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?”

Nicodemus might have been pursuing the ways or traditions of the Pharisees by asking questions as part of a religious debate, or he may have been seriously asking this question from puzzlement. He might have thought Jesus literally meant a person needed to go back into his mother’s

womb, which he knew was impossible. Jesus was speaking about spiritual matters, not physical, about a kingdom that was not of “this world.” Since Jesus knew what was in everyone and what everyone was thinking, Jesus went right to the heart of the issue without debating. Jesus also answered Nicodemus in a way that would influence him to keep thinking about what Jesus taught and how it applied to his life.

(John 3:5) 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.

Jesus did not answer Nicodemus as a rabbi would have done by quoting the Old Testament or former rabbis. Jesus spoke with authority and told him spiritual facts that were beyond his complete understanding, especially at that point in their discussion. Consistent with the preaching of the good news by Jesus and John the Baptist, “born of water” includes or means repentance and baptism. Just as water cleanses the body physically, by repenting and being baptized a person shows they have turned from their sins and want to be cleansed morally and spiritually by God. By “the Spirit” includes or means that through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, Jesus will baptize the believer in the Spirit. As we learned from John the Baptist’s preaching in John 1:33, John said, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” In Acts 2:38, when Peter answered a similar question, he replied, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

(John 3:6) “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

A man and woman’s flesh can lead to the birth of a child of flesh, a physical human being born in the image of God. On the one hand, “water” in John 3:5 may be thought of in this context, since babies are carried first in water before they are physically born, and they will need to be born of the Spirit. But in Romans 3:23, we learn that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And John wrote in 1 John 3:4, “Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” Even with all his learning and

devout religious practices, Nicodemus had sinned and was guilty of lawlessness. He knew this in his heart. He needed to be born of the Spirit, and practicing the laws of Moses would not enable him to be born of the Spirit. Only Jesus could give him this new birth. When the Holy Spirit enters believers by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, they are spiritually born again or brought to spiritual life. John does not record how much Jesus explained to Nicodemus: we need the rest of the New Testament to learn more about the Holy Spirit and His work.

(John 3:7) “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

Based on Nicodemus’ vast knowledge of the Old Testament and rabbinic discussions, Jesus told him that he should not be surprised that a person’s life must be totally changed or transformed, that he must be born again in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. One must change; one must turn from selfishness; one must turn from a totally self-centered concern; one must turn from trying to obey the laws of the Jews to be right with God. One must change to living by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, which involves nothing less than a total life transformation as the result of being born again. One must be born again to turn from loving one’s own self supremely to loving God supremely with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength. In the process of a believer making these changes, the Holy Spirit works in him from the very beginning. As they are born from above, believers turn from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness.

(John 3:8) “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.”

Only God can understand all the fine details of how and why the wind blows in different ways over various cities and countries around the world at different times. In Jesus’ day, people did not have the technology to predict tornadoes or measure the windspeed of a hurricane, and even today predicting the weather is far from perfect. Likewise, no human being can understand the details of how and why different people around the world come by God’s grace to saving faith in Jesus Christ and receive the Holy

Spirit to indwell and work within them in the kingdom of God. Though many people try to explain “the psychology of conversion,” they cannot adequately explain the work of the Holy Spirit—they can only truly say that the Holy Spirit is involved and working whenever anyone comes to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and is born of the Spirit.

(John 3:9) Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus asked the question almost all believers and many unbelievers who have heard the gospel have asked. Nicodemus still wanted to know how someone can be born again. Perhaps thousands of books have been written to explain what Jesus said and what the Bible teaches about the new birth, but exactly how and when the new birth through the Holy Spirit happens within us cannot be known by us with our limited human understanding and finite minds, even after we are born again. Thankfully, no one needs to know how the wind blows to know by experience that the wind blows, and no one needs to know how the Holy Spirit works to know by experience that the Holy Spirit has worked and works within them; therefore, believers give glory, praise, and thanks to Jesus Christ for their becoming children of God and seeing and entering the kingdom of God.

(John 3:10) Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

Jesus’ question should have led Nicodemus to a humbler opinion of himself. Nicodemus was recognized in Jerusalem and perhaps in all of Israel as “THE teacher” (in the Greek text). He was “the teacher” above all others. Jesus indicated that no religious leader can fully understand these truths. No human being has the capacity to understand fully these truths. Jesus is the one and only begotten Son of God; those who believe in Him are adopted children of God. As adopted children of God, we will never understand the Father as fully as Jesus does. We must humble ourselves and come to trust in Jesus and His teachings without completely understanding everything or having all our questions answered. It is enough to know that Jesus came from God and God was with Him as Nicodemus knew from observing the signs Jesus performed. In John 20:30, we read, “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his

disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Nicodemus had seen enough signs and had learned enough truths from hearing Jesus teach the crowds to believe that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,” and eventually Nicodemus did what Jesus told him to do. Nicodemus came to obey Jesus’ commands because he had been born again and knew “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” without understanding “how” he had been born again. Without believing Jesus and obeying Jesus, Nicodemus would have never come to “understand these things” in even a limited way.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How did John describe Nicodemus?
2. What did Nicodemus believe about Jesus?
3. What must happen before someone can see the kingdom of God?
4. What do you think it means to be born of water and Spirit?
5. How much must someone know about how a person is born again before they can be born again?

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