

The Greatest Question Never Asked

John 3:1-15

- 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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."
- ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again¹ he cannot see the kingdom of God."²
- ⁴ 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?"
- ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit,³ he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said to you [singular], 'You [plural] must be born again.'

¹ Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? ... He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions (Deut 32:6, 10-11 ESV).

² The LORD will reign forever and ever (Ex 15:18 ESV); To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan 7:14 ESV).

³ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek 36:25-27 ESV).

- ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes,⁴ 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."
- ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"
- ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"
- ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what **we** know, and bear witness to what **we** have seen, but you [**plural**] do not receive our testimony.
- ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"
- ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven,⁵ the Son of Man.⁶
- ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
- ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.⁷

⁴ No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind (Ecc 8:8 NAS).

⁵ Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name? Surely you know! (Pro 30:4 ESV); You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:51 ESV); There was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! (Gen 28:12 ESV).

⁶ I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him (Dan 7:13 ESV).

⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Num 21:8-9 ESV).

Nicodemus and the Greatest Question Never Asked

The most famous verse in the Bible comes at the beginning of John's personal commentary on the curious meeting between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. **John 3:16** tells us, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only (unique) Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Eternal life is the focus of this beloved verse, because eternal life is the focus of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. Eternal life is the Holy Grail that all human beings seek at some point in their life; even those who later give up and give in to complete skepticism about such a possibility.

Human beings were created to live forever. In the Garden of Eden, the curse was **to die** (**Gen 2:17**). The cherubim were placed at the entrance to Garden to guard the way to the Tree of **Life**, "lest he reach out his hand and take of the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (**Gen 3:22**). And so right at the beginning of the Bible, the most basic question of human existence, of life and death, is presented. In America, we are experts at avoiding the topic of death. Our entire modern experiment is being spent amusing

ourselves, entertaining ourselves, and generally keeping ourselves as far away from that conversation as possible. We don't teach this to our children. We don't talk about it as old people. We don't want to think about it even when one of our family members has just expired. We don't bring it up in conversations. We don't read books about it. Nevertheless, you are going to die one day. Sooner or later you will have to answer the question that Valeria asked Conan, “Do you want to live forever?”

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Jewish tradition places the origins of the Pharisaic movement in the days of Ezra and the great scribal movement of the 5th century B.C. Whether true or not, it is not really until the first century that Pharisees became an important sect within Judaism. But this they did become as Josephus (a Pharisee himself) writes, “[Pharisees are] extremely influential among the townsfolk; and all prayers and sacred rites of divine worship are performed according to their exposition. This is the great tribute that the inhabitants of the cities, by practicing the highest ideal both in their way of living and in their discourse, have paid to the excellence of the Phari-

sees” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.15). Nicodemus is one of these people.

The common opinion today of the Pharisee is based not on outward appearances, but on the things Jesus tells us about their hearts. Outwardly, Pharisees were deeply religious, admirably pious, devoted to the law, and master teachers of the Word of God. There is nothing wrong with any of that, assuming something else is right first. You would do well to remember that the most of the time, the Pharisees were the most outwardly nice and good people in all of Israel. They were the perfect religious devotees.

Nicodemus is also said to be “a ruler of the Jews.” This refers to the *Sanhedrin*, the great Jewish Council, sort of the Supreme Court of ancient Israel. But rather than 9 judges as we have, the Sanhedrin had 70⁸ (a number that intentionally reflects the heavenly court of the sons of God).⁹ The point is, Nicodemus is a highly influential

⁸ Some will say 71, but that number is simply there to break a tie. It also corresponds, in my mind at least, to the 71st person of the heavenly court, “the one like a son of man” (Dan 7:12) in one of the classic divine council scenes of the OT, a passage that is reflected in John 3 at least a couple of times.

⁹ “Seventy descendants of Jacob, Ex. 1:5; seventy elders of Israel, 24:1; seventy disciples sent out, Luke 10:1–16; outside the Bible, seventy sons of the Canaanite goddess Asherah and seventy members of the Sanhedrin.” John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*

religious leader, whom Jesus will later refer to as “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10). This sets the stage for the dialogue which follows.

It tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night” (John 3:2). It does not say if he came alone or with a group. Jesus uses plural pronouns at least twice (John 3:7, 11), so some people think he came with a small entourage. Other’s think he came by himself in stealth, under the cover of darkness, so as not to be seen. Guessing about his motives is speculative, and at this point in the life of Jesus, there is no reason why even an important Pharisees would be afraid to be seen with Jesus. Though “night” puts a time-frame on the encounter, perhaps it is best to see this as a literary way of foreshadowing John’s commentary later in this chapter, “People loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19). Coming at night reveals something about the inner life of Nicodemus.

What is the purpose of Nicodemus coming to our Lord? He tells Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a

Commentary (Old Testament) Volume 1: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 55, n. A-73.

teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). What Jesus says in response is fascinating, and I wonder if you have ever tried to think about the logic between vs. 2 and vs. 3. Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Notice, Nicodemus did not ask Jesus a question. Yet, Jesus answers him as if he did. Notice also, Nicodemus has nothing to say about the kingdom of God. Yet, Jesus answers him as if he did. When I think about the direction our Lord takes this conversation, I have to conclude that he is answering **the greatest question that someone never asked!**

Jesus’ concern here is with seeing the kingdom of God, being born again, being born of water and spirit, receiving the testimony and having eternal life. These are all incredibly important things to comprehend. Yet, Nicodemus isn’t concerned with any of that at all. So why might Jesus have responded to Nicodemus like this?

Why Wasn’t The Greatest Question Asked?

I could speculate and say that Jesus is just very concerned for this man’s soul, which would be true. But it is

better to look at the text itself for a more immediately answer. It has to do with what Nicodemus says to Jesus. “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.” The connection goes back to **John 2:23-25**. There are two things in that passage that are directly related to the story of Nicodemus. The first is that it said, “Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing” (**vs. 23**). It is the “signs” that Nicodemus picks up on here. He clearly believed that signs pointed that Jesus is a “teacher come from God” and that “God is with him,” for this is what he tells the Lord.

And yet in those previous verses it says, “Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (**vv. 24-25**). “Bearing witness” is the other connection. It says in **John 3:11**, “You do not receive our testimony” and in **vs. 12**, “You do not believe.” Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus’ heart, that it was a spurious faith, a belief of the eyes, trust in signs but not the Son. Nicodemus is the first of several people who act as examples of those who saw Christ’s signs

in [John 2:23-25](#). It makes me wonder about many of the millions of people who flock to faith healers. Just what exactly *are* they trusting in? People always want a [good show](#). As I said earlier, the show keeps us from caring about the deep questions of life and death.

I had a conversation this week with a friend about worship. He was taken aback when someone said, “We don’t plant churches in America. We plant worship services.” I responded, “Frankly, I worry that we aren’t even planting worship services, but centers of entertainment and amusement.” He then said, “The question I have been wrestling with this week is how do you change the paradigm when 80-90 percent of the people in the room (and on some weeks I am one of them) are more concerned about the event than the God who call us to live our lives together as one body?” I responded, “We have to stop catering to their felt needs, no matter how difficult it may be, so that they can actually see the real needs and ask the meaningful questions about life.” [We’ll talk more about worship when we come to the woman at the well in Ch. 4](#). I bring this up, because it shows just how prevalent our distractions

about truly important matters have become, even in the Christian church.

Nicodemus appears in [two other places](#) in John's gospel (and that's all for the entire Bible). In [7:50-51](#) he shows up as asks a frenzied crowd, “[Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?](#)” Then, in [19:39](#) he brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight in order to bury Christ's body as was the custom of the Jews. Some see a progression in Nicodemus' life here, from one outside of faith to a true follower of Christ.¹⁰ Others see a consistent, yet unregenerate portrait of a moral Jew, a decent, fair-minded, kind Jewish leader, who nonetheless falls short of regeneration.¹¹ Frankly, both positions are speculative and conclude more than John wants to tell us.

The important thing that Nicodemus does for us is here is show us what it takes to have eternal life, and confront us with the same things Jesus confronts him with. You can't be more fascinated in the [signs](#) than you are in the [Son](#). In this instance, while never mentioning the word, it is clear

¹⁰ Carson, John, *PNTC*, 186; Morris, John, *NICONT*, 186.

¹¹ Kostenberger, John, *BECNT*, 119. His argument is that in ch. 7 Nicodemus simply acts fairly, like Gamaliel with John and Peter in Acts 5:34-36.

that Nicodemus is being confronted with *his sin*. Nicodemus has no true awareness of his own depravity. That's why he enjoys the show so much, when he should be trusting in the Messiah. This is the typical picture we get of the Pharisees throughout the NT. It reminds me of the stories I've read about Benjamin Franklin, who used to attend many of the services that **George Whitefield** had during the Great Awakening. Franklin was no Christian, and never claimed to be one. But he went for the spectacle and the superstar. It has been said that Whitefield was America's first true celebrity!¹² I wonder if we may be seeing a similar thing today in the neo-Calvinism that is sweeping across America, a movement that is almost completely celebrity driven, and several which has caused some to resign or take personal leaves of absence because of the pride it is inducing.¹³

At any rate, it is important to think about what Nicodemus is doing, because it gets at one of the chief areas of

¹² "Though little known today, George Whitefield was America's first celebrity." *Christian History Magazine-Issue 38: George Whitefield: 17th C. Preacher & Revivalist* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1993).

¹³ Bobby Ross Jr., "Sex, Money ... Pride? Why Pastors Are Stepping Down." *Christianity Today*, July (Web-only) 2011, Vol. 55. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/julyweb-only/sexmoneypride.html>

human pride and causes of unbelief. Carson explains to us that “like other Jews, [Nicodemus] wants to set up criteria by which to assess who Jesus is. Jesus rejects the priority of Nicodemus, and radically questions his qualification for sorting out ‘heavenly things’. Nicodemus claims he can ‘see’ something of who Jesus is in the miracles; Jesus insists no-one can ‘see’ the saving reign of God at all, including the display of miraculous signs, unless born again.”¹⁴ Nicodemus doesn’t bring up the kingdom of God and entrance into heaven, because it is the farthest thing from his mind. This man is a Jew. All Jews go to heaven. Corporate election guarantees that. This man is a Pharisee. Even more than being Jewish, he was an exacting follower of the Law. Paul probably speaks for Nicodemus when he writes of himself, “Circumcised on the eighth day ... a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee ... as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Php 3:4-6).¹⁵ How many Children born into Christian households have had the same opinions as Nicodemus and have never been

¹⁴ Carson, 187-88.

¹⁵ “This ‘kingdom’ was one from which Nicodemus was at present excluded—a radical concept to one who as a Rabbi and a Pharisee and by virtue of his obedience to the law would have considered himself already a part of God’s kingdom.” Linda Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit: John 3:5”, *Trinity Journal* 1:2 (1980): 136.

confronted with their own sin? No one is born a Christian. It is not a birthright.

Partly because of this, and partly it seems out of plain curiosity, Nicodemus wants to know who this Jesus is, and believes himself in a position to be able to make a correct judgment. But Jesus knows that his own sin prevents him from seeing. **Spiritual things cannot be understood by the flesh, for they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14).** John will tell us later in this chapter that sin is indeed the problem and that people stay in the darkness for fear that their evil deeds will be exposed. He can no more make a proper judgment than can a blind man in a police lineup. He can no more hear what Jesus is saying than can a deaf woman at a rock concert.

This gets at perhaps the most important word that you and others all around you need to hear in our day when almost all Americans think people are “**basically good.**” We need to hear that there is a perfect standard that all of us are held up to. As **Americans**, we are duty bound to obey the laws of the land. If we do not, we can be taken to court and punished. As **human beings**, we are duty bound

to obey the laws of the King. If we do not, we will be taken to court and punished eternally.

I am utterly shocked at how many people say they trust in Christ but have absolutely no concept of what it means to sin. What exactly, then, are they trusting in Christ to do? Studies again show that they are trusting in him to make their life better and happier. I am deeply saddened by the spirituality of our nation, which—because the church no longer preaches the law or sin, does not even have the categories to understand the first thing that Jesus teaches about heaven or hell. Those words are meaningless in a world where sin does not exist. Thus, Jesus is irrelevant to people at the most fundamental point, as the one who takes away God’s wrath, creates new life, and transfers citizenship from a kingdom of darkness to a kingdom of light.

All over this world, people look at Jesus and think, “He was a great teacher” or “He was a powerful magician/shaman/witch doctor/sorcerer” or “What a kind, loving person he was.” We see all of these responses to him in his own day, including some of them in this very chapter. But Jesus confronts us where we are most uncomfort-

able. He confronts us with who we are in relation to who he is. And when he does this, many either do not like what they see, or are absolutely baffled and unable to comprehend the first thing of what he says. This second response is what we see in the story of Nicodemus.

The Greatest Question Never Asked Answered

You Must Be Born from Above

Thankfully, **Jesus answers the greatest question never asked**, so that people may know more about him, his mission, his signs, and their own eternal well-being. He does it by laying out five points regarding God's kingdom. They are:

1. The necessity of a second birth (**vs. 3**)
2. The nature of that birth: It is spiritual (**vs. 5**) as opposed to physical (**vs. 4**)
3. The reason for the second birth (**vs. 6**)
4. Assurance regarding the reality of a spirit-birth (illustration, **vs. 8**; personal testimony, **vv. 11-12**)
5. The basis of that birth (the death of the Son of God (**vv. 13-21**)).¹⁶

¹⁶ Belleville: 141.

Jesus says that to enter the kingdom, “You must be born from above” (John 3:3). This is the necessity of the new birth. More commonly, you have heard it as being “born-again.” Many translations go this route, as the word (*anōthen*) can mean either “again” or “from above” and is deliberately vague.

This baffles Nicodemus who also takes Jesus to mean that a person must be born *again*. In typical wooden literalistic fashion consistently demonstrated by the Pharisees (see already in 2:20), Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about entering his mother’s womb a second time, as an adult (John 3:4). The Bible is sometimes quite funny, and that’s absurd. Benjamin Button isn’t a real person. Today, the phrase “born again” has become common parlance in the American vocabulary. We don’t literalize it as he did, but do we know what it really means? Given all of the Pelagianism that so many who use this terminology have, people who think they have the ability to decide who Jesus is all on their own just like Nicodemus, one has to wonder.

To be “born-again” really means to be born “from above.” John has already explained how this occurs back in 1:12-13, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in

his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” Now Jesus will tell you more about what this means. He will talk about the nature of the new birth.

Jesus says (in one of John’s favorite expressions), “Truly, truly, I say to you” (John 3:5). Literally this reads, “Amen, amen, I say to you.” What he is about to say you can take to the bank. Amen means something akin to Captain Picard saying, “Make it so.” When Captain Picard says it, it happens. How much more with Jesus?

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” This verse has given rise to no less than seven different interpretations.¹⁷ The most popular is to see water as a reference to baptism. One writer remarks, “In this new, divine, and spiritual birth, God himself, by the virtue of his Holy Spirit, is to us as a father; and the church, represented by the water, receives us into her bosom as our mother. Baptism gives us a right to the kingdom of God, provided we live like children of God and members of Christ, in

¹⁷ Belleville: 125-141.

being obedient to his Spirit.”¹⁸ That’s beautiful, but it isn’t exactly what Jesus is talking about.¹⁹

As Israel’s teacher, Jesus says Nicodemus should have known what he was saying, because he had the Scripture and the prophecies. **Ezekiel 36-37** is the key interpretive passage that Nicodemus should have understood. **Ezekiel 36:25-26** starts us off, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”²⁰ In this passage, water refers to “**that which inwardly purifies and cleanses**” such as when Peter says, “Not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an

¹⁸ Pasquier Quesnel, *The Gospels: With Moral Reflections on Each Verse* vol. II (Philadelphia: Parry * McMillan, 1855), p. 310.

¹⁹ **For time’s sake, I put this in a note:** Even though Jewish baptisms were going on, in one form or another, since the days of Moses, and especially here with John the Baptist, Jesus tells Nicodemus that as Israel’s teacher, **he should understand what he is talking about.** Instead, the man is baffled. Given that Christian baptism hasn’t even been instituted yet, it is impossible to think Nicodemus would understand that. And given the full NT interpretation of the OT, including all that it says about baptism in the OT as well as how we are saved by faith alone, it is very difficult to see how a legal purification in water would be necessary for entrance into the kingdom of God. Rather, baptism serves as a sacrament and symbol that one has already entered the kingdom of God.

²⁰ See also **Isa 44:3**, “I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.” See Greg Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 235-37.

appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21). In other words, it refers to regeneration, something that takes place on the inside. Christian baptism is only secondarily in view, as a picture and illustration laying in the background and shadows.²¹

People that are sinful need to be washed on the inside. Sin is a fire that comes out of a dragon. It is a poison that contaminates the water *in* the well. Like Nicodemus, you must be aware that you are a sinful person, that your heart is dirty, that that it needs a total transformation and new life.

In Ezekiel, “spirit” refers not the Holy Spirit, but “to that which partakes of the essential nature of God himself.”²² It is the inanimate part of the human being. It is the soul. We need new souls, souls raised to life. Dead people, walking zombies, are unclean. They can’t stand in the presence of God. They need *spirits* that are reanimated, not just bodies. Zombies are creatures that are reanimated bodies without souls. In the Bible, spiritual reanimation comes prior to physical resurrection.

²¹ Thus, the Spirit and waters are together in many figures of baptism in the OT: Gen 1:2; Gen 8:8; Isa 44:3 etc.

²² Belleville: 141.

Since Jesus is saying that the time of Ezekiel’s prophecy is now at hand, water and spirit must refer to the same things here. The capitalization of “spirit” in vs. 5 is unjustified (there is no definite article). Jesus will talk about the Holy Spirit in the next verse. But here, he is saying that a person must be made new, cleansed by internal water and given a new spirit.²³ People are not born into the kingdom of God. They are adopted into it after they have been raised from the dead.

Jesus gives the reason this is needed in vs. 6. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Now the first “Spirit” *should* be capitalized, for Jesus is telling you the source of the new birth. It comes from heaven, from the Holy Spirit. Just as all in Adam are born of “the flesh” (literally), so in Christ all are born of the Holy Spirit. He gives the new birth. It comes from heaven, not from a human’s will or good works. It comes from God. He is its origin. He is its maker. He is its Father.

In response, Nicodemus is no longer incredulous but amazed. Jesus says, “Do not marvel that I said to you,

²³ See how water “revives” the spirit in the OT: Jdg 15:9; 1 Sam 30:12; Neh 9:20.

‘You must be born again’” (vs. 7). He should not have been amazed, but should have understood the Scriptures he was teaching to his students. Alas, he didn’t. Like so many today, he didn’t understand them. He didn’t *believe* them. He was too taken with signs. He read them wrong, because he didn’t realize the seriousness of his own condition. **Unbelief is a moral problem.** Nicodemus made the whole OT out to be a covenant of works, attainable through corporate election and outward obedience.

So, Jesus gives him an illustration of the truth. This is where Ezekiel 37 comes into view. This truth is that of *personal* election, election unto salvation and not merely good works or a status as a privileged nation. God has always had a chosen people within a chosen people. This is vs. 8. “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.” Ezekiel 37 is the story of the dead bones come to life. Ezekiel is told to preach to the bones and then to prophesy to the breath: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live” (Ezek 37:9). Then the bones are raised and become a mighty army.

Both Hebrew and Greek have the same word for wind/spirit/spirit (*ruach/pneuma*). I have always found this fascinating. Go outside on a cloudless day and feel a breeze. Where does it come from? You can watch the TV news, but Nicodemus didn't have the luxury. In a world without satellites or the understanding of high and low pressure systems, the wind was utterly mysterious, and still is. It appears sovereign, able to go where it pleases without any restrictions.

This is how it is with people who are born of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit blows where he blows, into whichever person's heart he chooses to blow, through the means of the preached word, and no one can hold back his hand. He is God. He is sovereign. And where he blows in this manner, he creates new life, simply because it pleases him to do it.

The final word from Nicodemus is a word of **disbelief**. “**How can these things be?**” (**vs. 9**). He knew the Scriptures. But he didn't understand them (**vs. 10**). His lack of understanding was, in fact, a lack of faith. “**You do not receive our testimony**” (**vs. 11**).

In this Gospel, there are many witnesses: John the Baptist (1:19, 5:31), the woman at the well (4:39); Jesus and his works (5:36); the Father (8:18); John the Apostle (19:35; 21:24) and all of the disciples (15:27); the Helper (Holy Spirit; 15:26); and the Scriptures (5:39). In 3:30-32 the witnesses are those “born from above.” That is probably what is in view here too, although Jesus does not need them to be his witnesses.²⁴ Whichever witnesses Jesus has in mind, it is clear that Nicodemus (and others who simply look to the signs) does not believe them.

Jesus finishes out this conversation with a monologue, based on his statement, “You do not believe” earthly things ... how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (vs. 12).²⁵ He tells the man about just who it is that understands such deep things as the salvation he is presenting here. In doing so, he gives the man the basis for the new birth,

²⁴ With the divine council in the background of this chapter, perhaps the witnesses are those in heaven, though I’m not convinced of this. See the Appendix at the end of this sermon.

²⁵ **Again for sake of time:** Vv. 11-12 are curious. Vs. 11 introduces two different plural pronouns: “we” and “you.” Jesus says, “we speak of what we know” and then “you” (that is y’all) do not receive our testimony. Why the plurals? It is difficult to answer this question. Perhaps Nicodemus is not alone and Jesus is not alone. Perhaps both have groups of disciples and/or teachers with them. This is possible. Perhaps Nicodemus is there as a representative and Jesus is speaking for his disciples. Whatever the case, we are taken back to John 2:25 where Jesus “needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

which is his own death and resurrection. **Vs. 13** tells you, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” We’ve come across similar language to this in **1:51**, when the angels would be ascending and descending on the son of man. Here, the reference is clearly to himself. The proverb asks, “Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name? Surely you know! (**Pro 30:4**). The answer is, Jesus alone has descended from heaven to tell about heavenly things.²⁶

In a day when many Jewish books were being written about great saints who had been taken into heaven to return to earth and tell people about it,²⁷ only the Son of Man is able to truly understand and reveal these truths

²⁶ You may have noticed that **at this moment, Jesus has not yet ascended (the ESV and others make it sound as if he has)**. That does not take place until after his death and resurrection. So what does it mean that no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven? One answer is given by translating “except” as “but” such as **Revelation 21:27**, “**Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.**” It is not that those written in the book are impure, as “except” would make it sound. So also, we can understand it here. “**No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven.**”

²⁷ This is different from seeing a vision of heaven, while remaining perfectly intact on earth, as the prophets often did.

about the new birth, because only he has truly come *from heaven* to tell us about them. This is an extraordinary claim. It is one of the central tenants of the Christian faith. Jesus came from heaven. Who says that? Only crazy people or one that can back it up. Jesus was not crazy. He backed it up.

Thus, we are taken to the end of the discussion, to another [prediction of his death on the cross](#). He had already predicted this in the reference to the ziggurat of [1:51](#) where angels are ascending and descending on the [cosmic mountain](#) and [world tree](#). Now he uses another OT image, that of the [serpent on the pole](#). The reference is to [Numbers 21:8-9](#).

This is the story of the Israelites grumbling against Moses for bringing them into the wilderness. So God sent fiery serpents: *ha nahashim ha seraphim* ([Num 21:6](#)). [Nahash](#) is a word that can mean a snake, but it is also a word that refers to heavenly beings ([Gen 3:1](#)). [Seraphim](#) is similar. Your first thought of a Seraphim is probably a heavenly being. What exactly did God send to these people anyway?

Whatever they were, God told Moses to make a **bronze** serpent and hang it on a pole. The bronze would have made the figure appear shiny. In fact, the word bronze is related to the word serpent. Moses made a *nchsh nchshth*, a bronze serpent. When the people looked at it, they lived. Notice, they weren't be baptized. They didn't do good works. They simply looked at the pole, and through faith in the promise of God to Moses, they lived. This is the gospel.

So Jesus says, “**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.**” Why is Jesus identifying himself with a serpent? On one level, the answer is that he is becoming sin for us on the cross. But on another level, I suggest that he is actually referring to himself as **a heavenly being**, not a snake. This is the imagery of ascending and descending, as we saw with the **angels** in **John 1:51**. It is the language of a **Seraph**. Jesus, the heavenly being who descended to earth in the form of a man, must be lifted up. Jesus is also the son of Man who comes before the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 to receive a kingdom (**Dan 7:14**). This fantastic passage adds something to OT revelation, by telling us that there is a figure

in heaven who is both God and yet a son of Man. That is what Jesus is referring to. Jesus gives the remedy that the teacher of Israel should have understood.

What is the problem? Sin. What is that remedy? Eternal life by believing in the Son of Man. What is the remedy from? “Perishing.” Perishing does not mean ceasing to exist. It refers to punishment, banishment, and torment. Eternal life is its opposite. Whoever believes in Christ may have eternal life. “Belief” is what occurs when one is born of water and Spirit from above. It is through belief, belief that Jesus is the one who has descended from heaven, belief that Jesus death on the cross for sin takes away God’s wrath against your own sin, belief that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father taking up his kingdom over all powers and authorities in heaven or on earth.

But this belief in Christ has a prerequisite. It presupposes that you understand the nature of your rebellion and sin against God. Nicodemus, the virtuous pious kind natured Pharisee didn’t get it, just as many in our own day don’t either. Only God can open your eyes to these truths. But he does so through his word. And he loves to do so for

many people. It is through the preached word that you see Christ portrayed as the serpent on the pole. Look to him.

This is the answer God gave to a man that wasn't even asking the question. He did so because he took pity upon the man and showed him that if really wanted to know the truth, he had to forsake his pride and sin and turn in repentance to Christ in faith. Today, the same message goes out to all who hear. See the Son of man on the cross and now not on the cross, in the grave and now not in the grave, here on earth and now ascended to heaven before the eyes of watchful disciples. See and believe and whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Appendix:

The Nicodemus Story and the Divine Council

In his M. A. Thesis at Pepperdine University, Paul Sumner writes, “The Johannine writings seem to depict an interplay between two courts: the earthly Sanhedrin and the heavenly divine council. The words and works of Jesus are being scrutinized by both, and Jesus knows it. He frequently cites his heavenly Witness in defense of what he is doing and who he is (John 5:32; John 8:14, 18, 46).”²⁸

There was an earthly court in Judaism that developed after the pattern of the 70 elders of Israel that attended Moses and Aaron when they went up on Mt. Sinai at the invitation of God (Ex 24:1; 9). There is also a heavenly court, made up of divine beings called the “sons of God” (Ps 82:1, 6; 89:5-8; Dan 7:9-14; 1 Kgs 22:19-22; etc.).

The interplay between the two courts is intentional and ancient. It reflects the old adage, “on earth as it is in heaven.” The number of judges on the Sanhedrin council was 70 so as to parallel the number of the sons of God in the

²⁸ Paul B. Sumner, “Visions of the Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible,” A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Religion Division (Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University, 1991, 2011), 127.

heavenly council.²⁹ **John 3:1** begins by referring to the Sanhedrin, albeit indirectly, through Nicodemus who was a ruling member of that organization. Since this is where he comes from, the earthly counterpart to the heavenly court is the setting of the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.³⁰

John 3:1-15 also has numerous allusions to OT divine council passages. For example, becoming “born again” (**John 3:3**) alludes back to **Deuteronomy 32:6** where God is Israel’s Father, who also happens to have other heavenly “sons of God” (**32:8**).³¹ Another OT divine council setting is the famous dream of Jacob who sees angels ascending and descending on a ladder (**Gen 28:12**). Jesus uses the language of ascending and descending in **John 3:13**. Jesus also cites witnesses (plural) in **John 3:11**; which may or may not have reference to a heavenly witness.

²⁹ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament) Volume 1: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 55, n. A-73.

³⁰ This is perhaps reinforced by the plural pronouns “y’all must be born again” (**John 3:7**) and “Y’all do not receive our testimony” (**3:11**), which are difficult to explain if only Nicodemus is in view (I use the southern y’all because English has no good way of expressing the plural “you” of the Greek).

³¹ On “sons of God” as the correct reading see Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 158:629 (Jan-Mar, 2001): 52-74.

Perhaps the most substantial allusion is to **Daniel 7**. Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man” who has descended from heaven (**John 3:13**). This refers to the Son of Man who is presented before the Ancient of Days (**Dan 7:13**) in front of the heavenly “thrones” or members of the divine council. After he is presented, this Son of Man is given an everlasting dominion and a “kingdom” that shall not be destroyed. Jesus refers to this kingdom from **Daniel 7:14** in **John 3:3** when he tells Nicodemus “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the *kingdom of God*.” This Son of Man was a member of the heavenly council, yet was distinguished from them as unique among them. This is why Jesus is called the *monogenes* (only begotten or unique) son of the Father (**John 3:16**). For he is no mere created angel, but rather is the eternal Word of the Father. In the OT, this Son receives as an inheritance the nation of Israel (**Deut 32:9**), out of which will come people from among all the nations of the earth (**Ps 2:8; Ps 82:8**). These he calls “brothers,” (**Matt 12:48**) for they are now sons of the living God (**Rom 9:26**).

Finally, there is a strange reference to the cross as being like the time when Moses lifted up the serpent in the

wilderness (**John 3:14**). Why would Jesus use this as an example? Why would he compare himself to a serpent on a pole? While it is possible to take this figuratively as representing the curse Jesus became for us in a kind of play on the snake in the Garden of Eden, it is better to take it in the context he has just given—of himself as a heavenly being descended from heaven.

In the story, God sent fiery serpents to bite the Israelites. “Fiery serpents” is the Hebrew *ha nahashim ha seraphim* (**Num 21:6**). Nachash is a word that can mean a snake, but it is also a word that refers to heavenly beings, especially to the Shining One (as he is called in **Isa 14:12**), otherwise known as Satan (**Gen 3:1**). Seraphim is similar. Your first thought of a Seraphim is probably a heavenly being, not a snake. What exactly did God send to these people anyway?

Whatever they were, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and hang it on a pole. The bronze would have made the figure appear *shiny*. In fact, the word “bronze” is related to the word serpent. Moses made a *nchsh nchshth*—a bronze serpent. When the people looked at it, they lived. It appears to me that the fiery serpents that bit the Israelites

may very well have been otherworldly beings sent from the divine council in a scene reminiscent of the lying spirit sent by them to torment Saul ([1 Kgs 22:19-22](#)), or at least they are figurative of these heavenly beings if they were literal snakes. There is clearly some kind of typological relationship throughout Scripture between snakes and seraphim.

So the question now becomes, why would there be all of this behind-the-scenes imagery of the divine council in the confrontation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The answer is the topic that Jesus chooses to confront this man of the Sanhedrin with: being born again or being born from above. Entrance into the kingdom of God means you have to become a son of God. In the OT, Israel as a temporal nation was God's son ([Ex 4:22](#); [Deut 32:6](#); etc.). But an earthly son does not necessarily translate into a heavenly son. Pharisees like Nicodemus couldn't understand this. In Christ's eternal kingdom, God also has sons. These sons are not born into the kingdom, nor do they earn their way into it, or choose of their freewill to come to it ([John 1:12-13](#)). Rather, they are born of the sovereign movement of the Spirit. They are newly created heavenly creatures,

born from heaven, and created for heaven. These are human sons of God made fit and ready for eternity, as they are given eternal life.

This “sons of God” theme is a major theme in the NT and lying behind it is the sons of God (heavenly) and son of God (earthly Israel) of the OT. Both are being transformed when believers come into the kingdom of the Son of Man at the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit through the will of the Father in heaven. These are deep “heavenly things” (John 3:12) revealed by the Son of Man, the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16) to Nicodemus that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:15).