

JOHN 3 | *Eternal Life through the Son*

The Necessity of Spiritual Birth

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler (ἄρχων)¹ of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night² and said to him,

Rabbi,³ we⁴ know that you are a teacher (διδάσκαλος) come from God,⁵ 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 from above/again (ἄνωθεν)⁶ he cannot see (εἶδον) the kingdom of God. 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?⁷

5 Jesus answered,

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water⁸ and the Spirit,⁹ he cannot enter into (εἰσελθεῖν εἰς) the kingdom of God.¹⁰ 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh,¹¹

¹ As an ἄρχων, Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Exactly three years later the Sanhedrin would condemn Jesus to death (Lk 22:66).

² By night is heavily emphasised by John (Jn 19:39). Nicodemus left the darkness and came into the light. Judas would leave the light and go out to the darkness (Jn 13:30).

³ Nicodemus calls Jesus a teacher (v. 2), and Jesus calls Nicodemus a teacher (v. 10). This is a conversation between two teachers.

⁴ Among the Pharisees, Nicodemus was not alone in being positive toward Jesus (Jn 12:42).

⁵ Many religions call Jesus a teacher from God. But that's not enough to be born again.

⁶ "[I]n extension fr. a source that is above, *from above*... at a subsequent point of time involving repetition, *again, anew*... J 3:3, 7... is designedly ambiguous and suggests also a transcendent experience *born from above*" (BDAG, 92).

⁷ **Jn 1:13** 13 ... Who were born, not of blood, nor of the desire of the flesh, nor of the desire of man, but of God.

⁸ There are five views on what water refers to: "(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... [Mk 16:16]. (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" (E. A. Blum, *BKC*, 2:281). The fifth view makes the most sense (see Jn 1:33; 3:11; Mt 3:1-6; Ac 1:5; 2:38; 10:45-47; 11:15-16; 19:2-5). Permanent spiritual bathing (Jn 2:6; 3:25) occurs in the life of every believer at the moment of faith in Jesus (Eph 5:26; Tit 3:5; Heb 10:22). For example, the disciples were bathed even though they still needed their feet washed (Jn 13:9-10). This is all part of the New Covenant (Eze 36:25-27).

⁹ See *Spirit Baptism*.

¹⁰ Does the kingdom of God refer to Jesus' Messianic kingdom on earth, the new heavens and earth, or God's present, invisible kingdom? See *Kingdom of God*.

¹¹ See *Flesh*.

and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born from above/again. 8 The wind blows where it desires, 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.¹²

The Lifted Up Son of Man

9 Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? 10 Jesus answered him,

Are you the teacher of Israel (ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ) and yet you do not understand these things?¹³ 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we¹⁴ speak of what we know, and testify to what we have seen, but you 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?¹⁵ 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven,¹⁶ the Son of Man.¹⁷ 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,¹⁸ so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁹ 15 that whoever believes in (ἐν αὐτῷ) him may have eternal life.²⁰

¹² See Nu 11:29 for an example. To be born from above/again involves being born of water and the Spirit.

¹³ Jesus expects Nicodemus to understand these things because they are essential to the New Covenant. See *New Covenant*.

¹⁴ Jesus is probably referring to John the Baptist and himself.

¹⁵ If we believe Jesus regarding earthly things, he will reveal to us heavenly things.

¹⁶ Jesus is fully man, but his origin is completely different to that of other men.

¹⁷ See *Jesus as Son of Man*, *Jesus' Incarnation*, and *Jesus' Ascension*. As the Son of Man, Jesus is the only ladder between heaven and earth (Jn 1:51).

¹⁸ What a bizarre idea that the Son of Man (Da 7:13) would be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness (Nu 21:6-9). **Nu 21:6-9** 6 ...Yahweh sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 And the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you. Pray to Yahweh, that he take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And Yahweh said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. 9 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.

¹⁹ Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension were necessary for our spiritual birth to be possible (Jn 7:39). He became a curse for us (Ga 3:13; cf. Ro 8:3). He wasn't a serpent (Ge 3:15), but he was punished as if he was. **Jn 8:28** 28 ...When you [Jewish leaders] have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I Am.... **Jn 12:32** 32 ...I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

²⁰ All the snake-bit Israelites (Ro 3:9) had to do was to look at the bronze serpent—nothing else. Likewise, all we have to do is to believe in Jesus—nothing else (Jn 6:40). See *Total Depravity*, *Faith Alone*, and *Eternal Life*. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus may end here.

Faith in the Son of God

16 For this is how God loved²¹ the world (κόσμος), that he gave his one and only (μονογενής)²² Son,²³ that whoever (ἵνα πᾶς ὁ)²⁴ believes into (πιστεύων εἰς) him should not perish (ἀπόλλυμι)²⁵ but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn (κρίνω)²⁶ the world, but in order that the world might be saved (σώζω) through him.²⁷ 18 Whoever believes (pres.) into him is not condemned (κρίνω),²⁸ but whoever does not believe is condemned (κρίνω)²⁹ already, because he has not believed (perf.) into the name of the one and only (μονογενής) Son of God.

Light and Darkness

19 And this is the judgment (κρίσις):³⁰ the light³¹ has come into the world, and people loved (ἀγαπάω, aor.)³² the darkness (σκότος) rather than the light because their works were evil (πονηρός). 20 For everyone who does morally base (φαῦλος)³³ things hates (μισέω, pres.) the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed (ἐλέγχω, aor. pass).

²¹ **Ro 5:8** 8 ...God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Messiah died for us. **1 Jn 4:9-10** 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. See *God's Love*.

²² The scholarly consensus is that μονογενής does not mean “only begotten” (from γεννάω) but “one and only” (from γένος). Most modern English versions have adopted this new understanding (ESV, NRSV, NIV, NLT). Only a few retain “only begotten” (NKJV, NASB). Regardless, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is not up for dispute.

²³ Like God, Abraham was willing to give up his one and only son (Ge 22:2). **Ro 8:32** 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

²⁴ The Greek indicates everyone has a legitimate free will choice to believe or not believe. See *Free Will*.

²⁵ “[T]o cause or experience destruction...mid. perish, be ruined...of pers. *perish, die* of things *be lost, pass away, be ruined...to fail to obtain what one expects or anticipates, lose out on, lose*” (BDAG, 116). “Perish (apolētai) means not annihilation but rather a final destiny of ‘ruin’ in hell apart from God who is life, truth, and joy” (E. A. Blum, *BKC*, 2:282). See Jn 10:28; 17:12.

²⁶ “[T]o engage in a judicial process, judge, decide, hale before a court, condemn, also hand over for judicial punishment, freq. as a legal t.t.” (BDAG, 568).

²⁷ God does not delight in the death of the wicked (Eze 18:23, 32). He desires everyone to be saved (1 Ti 2:4; 2 Pe 3:9). See *Atonement*.

²⁸ See *Justification*. **Jn 5:24** 24 ...Whoever hears my word and believes [the Father] who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. **Ro 8:1** 1 There is...now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Jesus.

²⁹ See *Condemnation*.

³⁰ See *Final Judgment*. **Jn 9:39** 39 Jesus said, For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.

³¹ See *Light*. **Jn 1:9** 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

³² See *Sin*.

³³ “[P]ert. to being low-grade or morally substandard, *base*” (BDAG, 1050).

subj.).³⁴ 21 But whoever does what is true³⁵ comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works³⁶ have been carried out in God.³⁷

Jesus Increases, John Decreases

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptising.³⁸ 23 John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim,³⁹ because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptised, 24 for John had not yet been put in prison.⁴⁰

25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.⁴¹ 26 And they came to John and said to him,

Rabbi,⁴² he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified—look, he is baptising, and all are going to him.⁴³

27 John answered,

A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.⁴⁴ 28 You yourselves testify to me that I said, I am not the Messiah,⁴⁵ but I have been sent before him.⁴⁶ 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.⁴⁷ The friend of the bridegroom,

³⁴ “[T]o scrutinise or examine carefully, *bring to light, expose, set forth*” (BDAG, 315). See Jn 1:5; Ro 1:18-32.

³⁵ See *Truth*.

³⁶ See *Good Works*. There is a huge difference between human “good” and divine good.

³⁷ **Jn 15:5** 5 I [Jesus] am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that produces much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

³⁸ Jesus' disciples were performing water baptism under his direction (Jn 4:2).

³⁹ John was baptising east of the Jordan (Jn 1:28). Now he is baptising west of the Jordan.

⁴⁰ Jesus' Galilean ministry had not yet begun (Mt 4:12).

⁴¹ There must have been a dispute about how the customary Jewish purification rites (Jn 2:6) relate to the baptisms of John and Jesus. The ministries of John and Jesus were making those rites obsolete (v. 5; Jn 2:6; 13:10).

⁴² Both Jesus (Jn 1:38, 49; 3:2) and John are called Rabbi in this chapter (see v. 11).

⁴³ Were these Jews trying to incite John to jealousy? If so, they failed miserably.

⁴⁴ **Mt 21:25** 25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? **1 Co 4:7** 7 What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? **Jas 1:17** 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights....

⁴⁵ See Jn 1:20, 25.

⁴⁶ **Ac 19:4** 4 ...Paul said, John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.

⁴⁷ See *Jesus as Bridegroom*.

who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.⁴⁸ 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.⁴⁹

Jesus Is Above All

31 He who comes from above⁵⁰ is above all.⁵¹ He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.⁵² 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard,⁵³ yet no one receives his testimony.⁵⁴ 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal⁵⁵ to this, that God is true.⁵⁶ 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words⁵⁷ of God, for he⁵⁸ gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son⁵⁹ and has given all things into his hand.⁶⁰ 36 Whoever believes⁶¹ into (εις) the Son has eternal life.⁶²

⁴⁸ **Jn 15:11** 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. **Php 2:2** 2 ...Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

⁴⁹ See *John the Baptist*. Probably John the Baptist's statement ends here. The apostle John's theological commentary (vv. 31-36) begins.

⁵⁰ **Jn 8:23** 23 [Jesus] said to [the Jewish leaders], You are from below. I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world.

⁵¹ See *Jesus' Sovereignty*.

⁵² Although Jesus was and is truly man, his ultimate origin differs from all other men.

⁵³ See v. 11.

⁵⁴ See v. 19; Jn 1:11; 5:43; 12:37.

⁵⁵ **Jn 6:27** 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal. See also 2 Co 1:22; Eph 1:13; Re 7:3-8.

⁵⁶ See *God's Truthfulness*. To reject the Father's testimony about Jesus is to call him a liar (1 Jn 5:10).

⁵⁷ Jesus is the Word of God (Jn 1:1), the one who makes the Father known (Jn 1:18). One can't receive Jesus without receiving his testimony.

⁵⁸ Probably this is the Father giving the Spirit to Jesus (Jn 1:32; Is 11:2; 42:1). But see Jn 14:16-17; 16:7.

⁵⁹ See *Trinity*.

⁶⁰ See *Jesus' Sovereignty*.

⁶¹ See *Faith Alone*.

⁶² See *Eternal Life*.

Whoever does not obey (ἀπειθέω, pres.)⁶³ [the Father's command to believe into] the Son shall not see life,⁶⁴ but the wrath (ὀργή)⁶⁵ of God remains on him.

⁶³ “[D]isobey, be disobedient...in our lit. disobedience is always toward God, God’s ordinances, or revelation” (*BDAG*, 99). Some interpret this verse as saying one is saved only if one believes in Jesus *and* obeys him. However, to “disobey” here means to disobey God’s command to come to the light (v. 21), look at the bronze serpent (v. 14), and believe in the Son (vv. 15-16, 18, 36). Interestingly, the NKJV translates this “he who does not believe the Son.” **Jn 6:28-29** 28 ...They said to [Jesus], What must we do, to be doing the works (ἔργα) of God? 29 Jesus answered them, This is the work (ἔργον) of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent. “The first and foremost obedience God requires is to believe in Jesus Christ whom He has sent” (C. Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship: How to Understand Some Difficult Bible Passages*, 119-120). The Father has issued a command to all humanity to believe into his Son (Jn 6:28-29; Ac 5:32; 6:7; Ro 1:5; 10:16; 16:26; 2 Th 1:8; 1 Pe 4:17).

⁶⁴ Eternal life and the kingdom of God (v. 3) seem to be synonyms in this chapter.

⁶⁵ This is the only time this word is used in *John*. See *God’s Wrath*. **Ps 2:12** Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Biblical Worldview

1. It is possible to be a believer in Jesus and be totally secret about it.

- a. The example of Nicodemus.
 - (1) Coming to Jesus by night, Nicodemus is the representative secret believer (v. 2). He knows about the signs Jesus has done (v. 2; Jn 2:23). He admits Jesus is a teacher come from God (v. 2). He is certain God is with Jesus (v. 2).
 - (2) However, Nicodemus is a very important person in Jewish society. Not only is he a Pharisee (v. 1), he is a ruler of the Jews (v. 1), which means he is a member of the 70-person Sanhedrin. Even more, he is “the teacher of Israel” (ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ)(v. 10). He is also very rich (Jn 19:39). His belief in Jesus would have shocked his colleagues (Jn 7:48).
 - (3) Over two years later, at the Feast of Booths, Nicodemus suggests to his colleagues that they ought to give Jesus a fair hearing (Jn 7:51), but he doesn’t confess his belief in Jesus openly. His colleagues joke that he is from Galilee (Jn 7:52).
 - (4) There were many other Jewish authorities besides Nicodemus who ended up believing in Jesus (Jn 12:42). But they did not confess him in order not to be put out of the synagogue (Jn 12:42). They loved glory from man more than glory from God (Jn 12:43). Contrast Paul (Ga 1:10).
 - (a) Like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus (Jn 19:38). He, too, was afraid of the Jewish leaders (Jn 19:38).
 - (5) After Jesus’ crucifixion, Joseph and Nicodemus obtained Jesus’ body from Pilate (Jn 19:38), bound it in linen cloths with 75 pounds of spices (Jn 19:39-40), and laid it in a new tomb (Jn 19:41-42). The amount of spices shows Nicodemus’s faith in and developing dedication to Jesus.
 - (6) By contrast, John the Baptist (Jn 1:29) and the disciples were open disciples (Jn 6:66-67), at least most of the time (Jn 18:27).
- b. Theological conclusions.
 - (1) There are secret believers and open disciples. All are justified by grace through faith in Jesus, are born again, have eternal life, and will enter the Messianic kingdom and beyond.
 - (2) Every believer is invited to become an open disciple, but not every believer will.
 - (3) Open disciples are rewarded in time and eternity (Mt 19:28-29). Secret believers forfeit rewards. See *Rewards*.
 - (a) Here, Nicodemus may have forfeited the opportunity to become one of the twelve disciples (see Lk 6:12-17) and to sit on a throne judging Israel in the Messianic kingdom (Mt 19:27-29).
 - (4) To be an open disciple of Jesus is very much worth it.