

## Bible Study Guide: Week of 5-25-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

### John 3:1-17

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

<sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

**<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”**

While the Pharisees are often portrayed negatively as opponents of Jesus, Nicodemus seems to be an exception to this stereotype. Nicodemus is portrayed as a “leader of the Jews,” that is as a member of the Jewish ruling council. In John 7:45-52, Nicodemus comes up a second time as Jesus’ sole defender among the Jewish leadership. While the others seek to arrest Jesus there, Nicodemus asks if they should not first conduct a thorough investigation or hearing to determine what Jesus is up to. He seems at least open to Jesus’ work and teachings, although as we will see by the end of this passage he does not yet believe in Jesus.

Nicodemus’ coming at night is significant in the storyline because it signals Nicodemus’ desire to hide his true motives and intentions from his fellow leaders and Pharisees. He doesn’t want them to know he has come to see Jesus and talk with him. At the same time, the setting of night is spiritually significant. Night and day, darkness and light are powerful primary symbols used throughout the gospel of John to talk about trust and faith in Jesus (light and day) and doubt and disbelief in Jesus (darkness and night). Jesus is, after all, according to John 1 “the light that was coming into the world.” Nicodemus is being drawn toward that light out of his darkness like a moth toward a flame, yet he doesn’t fully embrace or understand Jesus yet. He calls Jesus a teacher and recognizes something about God’s presence with Jesus, but he doesn’t yet understand that Jesus *is* God’s presence there with him. It is unclear which “signs” Nicodemus is speaking of. Here in Chapter 3, Jesus has only performed one true sign—the changing of water into wine. This sign was unknown to the general public, but only known to his mother, disciples, and the stewards at the wedding banquet where the sign occurred. He has also cleared the temple, at which time the leaders there asked him for a sign. Perhaps Jesus did other signs prior to this night meeting with Nicodemus which John doesn’t tell us about that caused him to marvel at Jesus’ signs.

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Jesus’ “answer” here is unusual in two ways. First, Nicodemus was paying Jesus a compliment, not asking him a question. So for him to “answer” Nicodemus seems strange. Second, his “answer” has seemingly very little to do with Nicodemus’ premise. Jesus essentially steers this conversation in the direction he wants it to go. Rather than talk about God’s presence or his own status as teacher or Rabbi or the signs he has done up to this point like Nicodemus wanted to, Jesus steers the topic toward a sort of rebirth. The Greek word for “from above” is *anōthen*—it can indeed mean both “from above” and “again” or “a second time.” Jesus probably intends this word to carry both meanings, but it is translated here for us as “from above.” Nicodemus’ reaction, however, suggests he hears this word only in terms of its meaning “born a second time,” which explains his over-the-top reaction in v. 4. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is telling him that he must crawl back into the womb for another literal birth—or at least that is what he is (perhaps satirically) stating.

Not to pick on our Evangelical Christian brothers and sisters, but the Evangelical notion of one being “born again” interestingly only picks up on one aspect of this Greek term *anōthen*. Jesus’ insistence that one must be “born from above” seems to be the primary meaning rather than Nicodemus’ misunderstanding that he must be “born again.”

Adding to the layers of meaning here, Jesus is described as being “lifted up.” To be “born from above,” then, is to be born in the way that John told us back in chapter 1:12-13 that one would be born of Jesus: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

Jesus says one must be born from above of water and the Spirit. On the cross (see John 19:30-37) Jesus was lifted up, gave up his spirit, and was pierced with a spear, at which point water and blood flowed forth. This seemingly gruesome image of the pierced side of Jesus could be interpreted as a birth image. Our birth is from Jesus. Nicodemus does not yet understand this. It isn’t enough to confess him as Rabbi or teacher. It isn’t enough to say “you must have the presence of God or else you couldn’t do the signs we’ve seen.” Those signs must point one to Jesus himself. It is in Jesus that we find the life God gives now and forever.

#### **Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

- 1. Nicodemus’ name means “victory of the people” in Greek. Do you think there is any significance to this name?**
- 2. What does it mean to you to be “born again/born from above?”**
- 3. How do you think Nicodemus felt when leaving this meeting with Jesus? How does this passage make you feel?**