

## The Gospel of John

### Session Six: Nicodemus and the New Birth

#### Commentary

#### John 3:1-21

3:1–4:42 The bulk of chaps. 3 and 4 is devoted to Jesus's encounters with Nicodemus, a representative of the Jewish religious establishment, and an unnamed woman representing Samaritan religion. Interspersed are explanatory sections (3:16–21, 31–36) and a vignette on John the Baptist (3:22–30). The encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are a study in contrasts. Nicodemus's status as a Sanhedrin member differs sharply from the lowly Samaritan woman who had a sinful past and present. Yet in both cases Jesus discerned deep spiritual need. He confronted Nicodemus about his need for regeneration and the woman about her sin.

3:1 Nicodemus was a common name in first-century Palestine. Ruler of the Jews refers to the Jewish governing body known as the Sanhedrin.

3:2 Nicodemus's coming to Jesus at night may have negative overtones ("night" is probably negative in 13:30 but not in 21:3; see also the reference to the present event without apparent negative connotation in 19:39). Coming from a "teacher of Israel" (3:10), the address rabbi denoted respect, especially since it was known that Jesus did not have formal rabbinic training (7:15). The signs mentioned in John's Gospel presumably included those performed in Jerusalem (2:23), possibly the temple clearing (cp. 2:18; 2:11).

3:3–8 The discussion of the need for spiritual rebirth develops the reference to the "children of God" who are "born ... of God" in the prologue (1:12–13). On "children of God," see 8:39–58 and 11:51–52. The phrase born of water and the Spirit probably refers to spiritual birth that cleanses from sin and brings spiritual transformation (Ezk 36:25–27). The kingdom of God, a major topic in the other Gospels, is mentioned by John only in vv. 3, 5 (see the reference to Jesus's kingdom in 18:36).

3:7 You is plural, probably indicating Nicodemus and other Sanhedrin members (cp. vv. 1, 11).

3:8 Jesus illustrated his pronouncement of vv. 3–5 with an analogy between wind and a person born of the Spirit. Wind and Spirit translate the same Greek and Hebrew words (Gk *pneuma*; Hb *ruach*). While the wind's origin is invisible, its effects can be observed; it is the same with those born of the Spirit.

3:9–10 Jesus may here be "returning the compliment" (see note at v. 2), though he chastised Nicodemus for his lack of understanding.

3:11–12 Jesus's knowledge is firsthand rather than speculative or based on hearsay. The earthly things probably refers to the teaching on spiritual regeneration.

3:13 Jesus's statement may allude to Pr 30:4. Only Jesus descended from heaven and returned there (Lk 24:51; Ac 1:9).

3:14–15 The reference to the Son of Man being lifted up is the first of three “lifted up” sayings in John (8:28; 12:32). All three speak of the future “lifting up” of the Son of Man in double meaning (possibly inspired by the language of Is 52:13). The reference in this verse invokes Moses's lifting up of a serpent in the wilderness so that everyone who had been bitten by a poisonous snake and looked at the serpent in faith was healed (Nm 21:8–9). The third and final “lifted up” saying (Jn 12:32) emphasizes that the lifting up of the Son of Man refers to Jesus's crucifixion (cp. 12:33 and the similar reference to Peter's martyrdom in 21:19).

3:16–18 God, out of love, gave his one and only Son (cp. 1:14, 18), so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life (see notes at 5:26; 14:4–6). John's favorite designation for Jesus is the Son sent by the Father (3:34–36; 5:19–26; 6:40; 8:35–36; 14:13; 17:1), imagery taken from the Jewish concept of the shaliach (messenger), according to which the sent one is like the sender himself and faithfully pursues the sender's interests (13:16, 20). Jesus is that “sent one” par excellence (9:7), and he in turn sends his disciples (see 20:21–22). Being sent implies that the commission, charge, and message are issued by the sender rather than originating with the ones sent. The messengers' role is to fulfill their commission according to their sender's will.

3:19–21 On Jesus as the light, see John 8:12.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *CSB Study Bible*. Edited by Trevin Wax. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017.