

## **Gospel of John Study**

### **Session 7**

In the last session we witnessed Jesus cleansing the Temple - why He did this and what it meant. Again, it showed Jesus was both the Son of God and the Messiah. Jesus also predicted His own death to be followed in three days by His resurrection, which further support John's claims of Jesus' true identity. Now this week John will move from Jesus' identity to how this knowledge can be used to gain eternal life. Before this chapter, John has not shared with us any conversation the Lord had with anyone of much length. However, that changes in this chapter as we will begin to see more in-depth conversations that Jesus has with various people and what these conversations mean. The one we are going to examine in this session spells out in very direct terms both the importance of being born again and what that means.

#### **[John 1:12-13]**

Q: How does one become a child of God according to this passage? *(v.12 - by receiving Jesus, by believing in His name. Knowing that He is the Son of God and Messiah and then accepting Him as one's Lord and Savior. This is done as an act of God not by the will of man.)*

Now that we know who Jesus is, we can now move forward to what His purpose was in coming to earth and how to take hold of this promise for our own lives. It turns out that there are certain credentials necessary to enter heaven but they aren't what many people think they are.

#### **[John 3:1-3]**

Q: What does this passage teach us about Nicodemus? *(v.1 - He is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews - thus a member of the Sanhedrin. V.2 - He was respectful to Jesus by calling Him rabbi as he himself was also a rabbi.)*

Now we need to unpack what these things mean so we can get the full meaning of just how important this conversation is. Nicodemus was very serious about religion. Pharisees were zealous to obey God's law. They were serious about obeying every command God laid out in the Old Testament. Just to give you an idea of what this entailed, there were 613 commandments in the Old Testament. 248 of these were "do's" and 365 were "do not's". There were about 6,000 Pharisees and they were committed to obeying every single law without exception. When a man became a Pharisee, he was placed in front of three witnesses and took an oath to uphold every detail of the law for the rest of his life. In fact, they were so committed to obeying every aspect of the law that they developed additional commands based upon the original 613 commandments to make sure they didn't mistakenly violate the originals.

Here's one example. One command was to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. To keep it holy meant that one had to avoid working on the Sabbath. The Pharisees spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out what constituted working. Is tying a knot on the Sabbath work? Yes and no. Tying a rope to a bucket to draw water from a well is work. However, a lady tying a knot in her clothing on the Sabbath was not work. So if you needed water on the Sabbath, a lady needed to tie a knot with her clothes around the bucket to draw water. In

**Jeremiah 17:21** the Israelites were commanded not to bear a burden on the Sabbath. So the question to the Pharisees was, “*What constitutes a burden?*” Is picking up a chair to move it closer to a table a burden? How about a woman picking up a brooch to wear it? Can a man pick up his dentures to wear them on the Sabbath?

As a result about being this serious about religion, he was also morally upstanding. There would never be any scandal involving Nicodemus and no skeletons in his closet or he’d never been allowed in their ranks.

Nicodemus was also a leader with great power and authority. He’s called a “ruler of the Jews” which means he was a member of the Sanhedrin. If you combined the United States Congress and the Supreme Court together, you would have the Sanhedrin. It was 70 men led by the high priest and they served as the ruling body for the entire nation of Israel. Nicodemus is one of those 70 men and much later in John we see Nicodemus arguing in front of the Sanhedrin which means he was an influential man of great authority.

With these credentials, you might expect Nicodemus to be haughty or arrogant yet he refers to Jesus as “rabbi” which is the same term people would have used to refer to him. Thus, we see Nicodemus as giving Jesus the same high level of respect that he himself was afforded. He went so far as to note that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God. He also was not dismissive of the miracles that Jesus has reportedly conducted, like some of his colleagues had been. But there is one little other tidbit concerning Nicodemus that is often overlooked. In v.10 Jesus calls him “the teacher of Israel” NOT “a teacher of Israel”. He was not only incredibly knowledgeable and would have been well educated but could have been the preeminent religious voice in his day and the only way to be known as “the teacher” would have been to have an amazing grasp of the Old Testament and been an super-expert in the law. Other leaders would have sought out his advice.

Due to his stature in the community, Nicodemus would have also been wealthy by the standards of his day. He’s the complete package, a true Jewish male who is highly educated and respected and part of the ruling council as well as wealthy.

Another thing to note about Nicodemus was that this section comes directly after **2:23-25** where John tells us of Jesus not trusting people who merely are witnessing the signs but not understanding their full meaning. In this respect John is linking Nicodemus with those from the Passover who saw the miracles and from them gained at least a partial faith but little more. However, unlike the multitudes from the Passover, Nicodemus is wanting to know more about Jesus.

Q: When did Nicodemus come to visit Jesus? (*v.2 - at night*)

Q: Why do you think that Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night? (*He wanted to conceal his meeting with this Galilean miracle worker under the cloak of darkness as not to be publicly associated with Jesus - this is the first reason.*)

One of the other reasons stems from John’s use of the word “night” throughout his gospel. Everywhere else John uses the word “night” (9:4, 11:10, 13:30) the word is used only in two ways. It either refers metaphorically to moral and spiritual darkness OR it refers to the night-time hours. While Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, during the night-time hours, what John is getting at is that Nicodemus’ “night” was blacker than he knew.

Q: There are two plural words in v.2? What are they? (signs and we)

While we've only seen Jesus perform one miracle directly, John has let us know that Jesus performed many others while at the Passover feast.

Q: What do you think the word "we" refers to? *(Nicodemus was seen as a spokesman for at least a group within the Pharisees. It allows Nicodemus the ability to hide, at least a little bit, behind his colleagues. In this we see at least a little bit of nervousness in Nicodemus' visit.)*

Q: What question does Nicodemus ask of Jesus? *(none ... yet. He has implied questions like "Who are you? We know you are a teacher from God but are You more? Maybe the Messiah?)*

Nicodemus claims that he (and at least some others) can see something in the miraculous signs that Jesus is doing but he doesn't understand the fulness of who he is speaking to.

Q: From past weeks, what is required to understand a sign from God? *(faith - faith in who Jesus truly is. One cannot understand a sign from God without understanding the identity of who conducted the sign. Nicodemus doesn't yet understand who Jesus is so he doesn't fully understand the signs yet, despite his great knowledge.)*

Q: What does Jesus tell Nicodemus? (v.3)

Back to the weeds of ancient Israel. The phrase "kingdom of God" is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. The Old Testament does speak of God's reign and His sovereignty and that He is a great King. Yet the prophets foresaw the coming of a kingdom at the end of history, presided over by David's son - the Messiah. What's interesting is that in some passages, this ruler was differentiated from the Lord while others He was identified with the Lord. For a Jew of Nicodemus's convictions, the kingdom of God meant to participate in the kingdom of God at the end of time, thus experience eternal, resurrected life. The predominant religious thought in Jesus' day was that all Jews would be admitted to the kingdom of God, apart from those who were guilty of the most heinous crimes or deliberate apostasy. In other words, a Jew would be admitted to God's kingdom and enjoy eternal life due to their status as an ethnic Jew. A man in Nicodemus' station in life would certainly expect that his natural destiny would be to be part of that kingdom at the end of human history.

Q: Based on this background, how do you think Nicodemus have felt after hearing Jesus' words in v.3? *(He would have been stunned and confused as well as other possible emotions of shock and dismay, if not even possible insult.)*

The question for Nicodemus and for us is what does the phrase "born again" mean? If being born again, rather than racial or ethnic identity, is what is required to see the kingdom of God (thus experience it) it's crucial to understand what it means. If we were to look at all the people Jesus spoke to in the book of John, we would find that this new birth is more fundamental, more important, more life-transforming and God-pleasing than anything anyone has experienced before this. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that there is a need for true and revolutionary

transformation, for a new life from another realm which is brought about by the intervention of the Spirit of God in order for a person to become a citizen in God's kingdom.

Some of the translations use the phrase "born from above" instead of "born again". The Greek word can mean either above or again. Nicodemus understood the word to mean "again" as we'll see. Jesus forces the point that this new birth is a new begetting, a new regeneration which is the work of the Spirit. Thus, above also could be a double meaning Jesus was using to stress both the need for a birth that fully and fundamentally regenerates a person to a new life and this life comes from above.

This passage in John is far from the only passage in the New Testament describing being born again - the new birth.

**[Titus 3: 4-7]**

Q: According to this verse, what were we not saved by? (*v. 5 - our deeds/works*)

Q: According to this same verse, what were we saved by? (*the washing of regeneration and the renewing by the Holy Spirit*)

**[I Peter 1:3, 23]**

**[I John 4:7]**

**[I John 5:1]**

So Jesus is confronting Nicodemus at a very basic level of his faith. He is telling this great leader of the Jews that he cannot hope to enter the promised kingdom due to his knowledge, gifts, understanding, position in society, integrity, righteous standing before the law, or good works. All of his religious credentials are insufficient to save him. Instead even he must enter into God's kingdom through a radical transformation comparable to physical birth.

**[Matthew 5:20 & 48]**

The question for the average Jew or person hearing Jesus speak that statement during the Sermon on the Mount would be , "*Then certainly no one can be saved if the most righteous men known cannot be saved.*" The problem was that the Scribes and Pharisees were banking on their external righteous acts, those seen by others, to save them. Most of them missed that God was looking at their hearts for the real change and that heart change could only be brought by the Spirit of God. In v.48 Jesus was telling those who would seek a right standing before God that in order for it to gain the desired results, they needed to do so perfectly, without flaw or misstep or the venture would be in vain. Since no one could keep the law without error, only a new birth from above, a renewed heart could bring about righteousness.

**[John 3: 4-8]**

Q: What was Nicodemus' question to Jesus after hearing His statement in v.3? (*v.4 - How can a man be born when he is old?*)

At this point, Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus was talking about at all. He could not believe that a new birth would be required for admission into God's kingdom. He was simply amazed and incredulous as his reply suggested. This statement turned everything he believes and has been taught upside down and inside out. Instead of having an automatic spot in God's kingdom, Jesus has said the opposite. None of his works matter, just a new birth - a new start. Notice that Nicodemus is taking literally Jesus' phrase "born again" to mean another physical birth.

Q: What does Jesus reply to Nicodemus in v.5? (*Truly, truly I say to you that unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*)

Q: What is Jesus trying to do with Nicodemus in this entire passage? (*He's trying to explain to him how to gain entry into the kingdom of God*)

With this in mind, then we need to understand that Jesus sees this respected teacher and leader of the Israelites completely befuddled at His statements about being born again. Yet, Jesus wants to explain the truth to Nicodemus and for Nicodemus to come to understand what He's saying. He loves Nicodemus and wants him to get this truth about how he can enter God's kingdom. Thus, this statement in v.5 is an explanation of v.3 and something Jesus thought Nicodemus would understand. With these thoughts in mind, we can go onto interpret what Jesus was saying in v.5.

V. 5 is a parallel statement to v.3. They both start with the "Truly, truly" and then move to an "unless one is..." statement. To interpret this verse then we need to compare the terms of v.3 to v.5. So, "born again" compares in some way to "born of water and spirit". Then "sees the kingdom of God" is equal to "enter into the kingdom of God". We understand the kingdom of God reference but what does being born again have to do with being born from water and spirit?

There are many theories on how to make sense of this phrase "water and spirit" but most break down when we consider that Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to understand the necessity of the new birth. I'm going to give you two ways that I used to believe (because I was taught them by respected teachers of mine) but have since moved past to get to a what I feel is a better solution to what Jesus was truly trying to say. (However, to be fair, one of these two could be right, as could be one of the other 10 or so ideas others have postulated over the years.) So these first two are just two examples that you are likely to read or run into if you study this passage.

1) Jesus compared the transformation into the new life to a physical birth. Thus, when a woman gives birth, her water (amniotic fluid sack) is broken and spills out. In this line of reasoning, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the natural birth comes first and is followed by the spiritual birth. This logic follows truth. The only problem is that there are no historical sources that tie physical birth to water. This wouldn't be a reference Nicodemus would be likely to understand. Most people's minds would not run to water being linked to amniotic fluid.

2) Another way of looking at this is that the water represents baptism - mainly the baptism of John the Baptist. After all, this is what the religious leaders were examining just

earlier in chapter 1. John the Baptist's baptism was one of repentance from sin. Thus Jesus is saying that one needs to repent from one's sins and accept the new life of the Holy Spirit to be born again. There has to be an honest dying to oneself in order to receive the new life of the Spirit. The logic of this solution is also solid and rests on the truth. The problem would be that the reference to water would be taken by Nicodemus to mean baptism. This is highly unlikely as Jesus as is not setting up a new ritual that would be needed for salvation. Think of it this way, would Jesus be telling Nicodemus that in place of the 613 commandments, he instead needs to just follow one - baptism for repentance of sins? Why would Jesus try to get a point across about a need for a new life by using a reference to another ritual?

3) There are several other ideas which have been bantered around by theologians for years but they don't make as much sense as the two I've mentioned above. Here's the deal, we need to look at several things to make sense of this phrase and come to an accurate interpretation that makes sense to Nicodemus.

a. the expression "water and spirit" is parallel to "again or above" describing the type of birth Jesus is discussing.

b. the preposition "of" governs both the words "water and spirit". They cannot be taken separately as the grammar puts them together as one unit. So the source of the new birth is a "water-spirit" source of regeneration. Both water and spirit go into the new life in some way.

c. The definite article translated "the" that most English translations put in front of the word "spirit" in v.5 doesn't exist in the Greek. The literal translation is "born of water and spirit" - not "the spirit".

d. Since Jesus is going to berate Nicodemus for not understanding these statements of His later in this passage and Nicodemus is a senior teacher in the nation, we need to go and look back at the Old Testament for what Jesus had in mind. That's where Nicodemus would have been searching for some shred of help in understanding Jesus' words. Remember, Nicodemus was an expert in the Old Testament. When confronted with these statements by Jesus about the need for a new life, Jesus knew this is where Nicodemus would go to find the answer. So we need to look at the Old Testament to locate these keys as well.

1. In the Old Testament, spirit describes God's foundation or nature of life.

### **[Genesis 2:7]**

Q: What did God do to bring life to the man He created? (*He breathed the breath of life into his nostrils. The word breath means spirit. Physical life comes from the spirit or nature of God.*)

### **[Job 34:13-15]**

Without God's spirit within man, there is no physical life at all. Yet many Old Testament writers looked forward to a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on humanity. The result of this pouring of the Spirit would be blessing and righteousness and an inner renewal that would cleanse God's covenant people from their idolatry and disobedience.

### **[Joel 2:28-29]**

2. In the Old Testament whenever water is used figuratively, it refers to renewal or

cleansing, especially when it is used in conjunction with the Spirit. The description of God pouring His Spirit upon people is likened to a person pouring water from a pitcher. Think of the case of the when God led the Israelites out of Egypt in the Exodus and had them pass through the water of the Red Sea, a symbolic cleansing from their lives in bondage to Egypt and their gods to the Lord. Also, back in Genesis, God cleansed the world of all evil through the flood. Only Noah and his family were spared the cleansing judgment upon the rest of the world by water.

### **[Ezekiel 36:24-28]**

So this “born of water and spirit” reference which is equivalent to “born again” reference is explaining in terms Nicodemus would understand that this new birth, this new begetting is a birth that cleanses fully and renews. It was the cleansing promised by the Old Testament prophets that would bring about the transformation of individual hearts as well as the nation. Like the other Pharisees, Nicodemus was over confident of his own righteous standing and flawless obedience to the law, as they understood it, to think that he would have any need of repentance or cleansing - let alone need his entire heart renewed to be born again. God is in essence saying, *“I don’t want you to clean yourself up. I want to make you brand new.”*

In this respect, Nicodemus is not unlike many in our modern world. Many think that while they may need a minor adjustment here or there, they don’t need a full transformation. We tend to see ourselves as pretty good and think that our credential that we ourselves establish will be sufficient to get us admission into God’s kingdom. We struggle to understand this concept on a new birth because we honestly don’t grasp just how bad we truly are. We don’t see the depths of sin in our own lives and miss the need for a new birth.

Q: What does Jesus mean in v.6? *(Like produces like. Natural human birth produces people who are earthly, part of humanity but not children of God. Children of God are only brought into existence when God births them - when a human is born-again. The divine Spirit produces a divine being - a new life. Imperfection begets imperfection while perfection (of the Spirit) begets perfection. Put another way, sin begets more sin while sinlessness begets more sinlessness.)*

Q: Why do you think that Jesus inserted v.6 into His response to Nicodemus? *(It cements the truth that a person needs a spiritual rebirth in order to participate in God’s kingdom and possess eternal life. It further separates the dilemma that Nicodemus was pondering about the nature of this new birth Jesus was telling him about by clearly pointing out that He was speaking of a spiritual re-birth.)*

After making this distinction about how the new birth happens and what that the nature of this new birth is spiritual and not physical, Jesus tells Nicodemus not to be amazed or surprised. Nicodemus should have understood the promises of the Old Testament. The new birth is taught in the Old Testament.

Q: As we were discussing the water/spirit phrase meaning cleansing and new life, one aspect of that life is that our sins are forgiven. Which sins are forgiven in this new life? *(all of them)*

**[Colossians 2: 13-14]**

**[Hebrews 10:14-18]**

Q: How does this passage describe our new nature? *(It is perfect)*

Q: What does God do about our sins once we have this new life? *(He remembers them no more)*

Q: Once we accept this new life, what sacrifices or works do we need to do? *(none)*

Back to John 3

Q: What control can humans have over the wind? *(none)*

Q: How can we tell that the wind is blowing? *(by our senses - if we are outside we can feel it, our eyes can see it moving objects and our ears can hear it whistle through trees and the like)*

Q: What does Jesus compare to the wind in v. 8? *(The Holy Spirit)*

So while we cannot control or fully understand the wind, we cannot understand or control the Spirit of God. But that does not mean we cannot witness its effects. Where the Spirit works, the effects are undeniable and unmistakable. So here's Jesus' point to Nicodemus, a person who is born of the Spirit cannot be controlled or fully understood by a person who has had only one birth - the physical birth. What is interesting is that immediately after the passage in Ezekiel 36 that we read that describes the water/spirit cleansing-renewing, is the vision Ezekiel had of the dry bones coming to life (Ezekiel 37). The dry bones were fashioned by God back into bodies but only came back to life once the Spirit of God blew over them again.

Q: So, from what we've learned from John thus far, how is a person born-again? *(It involves a person coming to realize that Jesus is both the Messiah/Savior and Son of God and then acknowledge a need for forgiveness of sins and a need for salvation then put one's trust in Jesus Christ as the One who brings the new birth.)*

A quick note here. To John, the author, the need for salvation is so important that he discusses it as soon as possible. We have only read through to the first one third of the third chapter of the book and are already confronted with what we need to know to be born again.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?