

THE SOURCE

John 3:1-21

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Introduction

The whole world was captivated by the story of twelve boys and their soccer coach who became trapped within a flooded cave in Mae Sai, Thailand. The team members, ages 11-16, were curiously exploring in the Tham Luang Nang Non cave in the northern province following their soccer game on June 23, 2018. The flood water rose. There was no clear way out for the boys, but Navy SEALs were able to reach them, providing protein drinks and minor medical care. Authorities pondered pumping water out, to allow enough headroom for the boys to swim through the black caverns. But that did not prove possible. Kian Khamluang, mother of a 16-year-old soccer player trapped in the cave, was very fearful at first that she had lost her son forever. Upon hearing that the boys were trapped, but still alive, she said, “It’s like he has been given a new life.”

With the rainy season lasting through October, experts feared the boys would have to make the dark cave their abode for many months until the water level dropped sufficiently enough to allow the boys to swim out in safety. But when all alternatives were deemed as doomed, the soccer team was saved by an international operation. The boys were medicated to relax them and placed on stretchers, as expert divers ferried them through the water-filled cave.

While these thirteen young men found “new life” in being rescued from death in a dark, water-filled cave, all of us who believe in Jesus are transformed from certain death and destruction to the “new life” of beginning again. Each one of us who has professed Jesus as Lord understands what it means to have a second chance, a new birth, a birth from above.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the Gospel of John records long conversations between Jesus and other characters that come across the pages of the Gospel. For example, our next two passages involve long conversations between Jesus and individuals with very different backgrounds. This week, we listen in on a conversation between Jesus and a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Next week, we eavesdrop on Jesus’ conversation with a sinful Samaritan woman at the well.

While Jesus does speak in the other Gospels, his comments are often limited to short, terse truths. Only in John’s Gospel do we have these extended conversations that allow us to gain additional insight into the character of our Lord.

Nicodemus (3:1)

Following the turning over of the money changers’ tables in the temple, John continues his story with a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Immediately, we learn two very important things about this important character in John’s Gospel: (1) he is a Pharisee; and (2) he is a member

of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have focused on carefully observing all the law and traditions of the elders. In observing the law, the Pharisees thought they had found the true way of salvation. As the saga unfolds, Nicodemus will learn that, though pleasing to God, obeying the law is not the source of salvation. From this rabbi named Jesus, Nicodemus will discover that a radical rebirth is what is required for a place in the kingdom of God (3:3, 5, 7).

Nicodemus' willingness to approach Jesus following Jesus' radical actions in the temple should not surprise us. Unlike the aristocratic Sadducees, the Pharisees had no real interest in the temple. In fact, a Pharisee might have secretly smirked over the fact that someone had finally put the temple-loving Sadducees in their place. While modern readers of the New Testament often picture Pharisees as the villains of scripture, in the first century they were actually very popular with the people of Israel and were held in the highest esteem for their dedication to keeping both God's law and the traditions of men.

Not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, he was also a "ruler of the Jews," meaning he was a member of the Sanhedrin (see 7:50-52). While this Jewish high court was probably dominated by another Jewish party, the Sadducees, the few Pharisees with seats on the Sanhedrin had power and influence because of their popularity with the people.

Knowing that Nicodemus was both a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish high court, we now understand that this interaction involves the perfect representative of God, the unique Son of God, face-to-face with the perfect representative of Judaism, a high-ranking Pharisee who wants to keep not only the law, but the traditions of men.

Night (3:2)

Much has been made of the fact that Nicodemus approaches Jesus under the cover of darkness. Some speculate that Nicodemus used the cover of night to hide the fact that he, a learned Pharisee, was seeking a conversation with a renegade rabbi, Jesus. While there might be some truth to that speculation, perhaps the best explanation comes when we examine John's use of "night" elsewhere in his Gospel (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30). On each of these occasions, night is used metaphorically for moral and spiritual darkness. No doubt, our author is truthful in telling us that Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but John is also alluding to the fact that Nicodemus' "night" was even blacker than Nicodemus had imagined. Before he meets Jesus, he lives in the realm of darkness.

Initiating the conversation, we observe that Nicodemus respectfully addresses Jesus as "Rabbi" and "teacher." Additionally, John indicates that although this rabbi lacks the appropriate credentials held by other religious authorities, he can, nonetheless, be seen as one who has "come from God as a teacher." Nicodemus is able to come to this conclusion because he has recognized the "signs" performed by Jesus as a clear indication that God is with Jesus.

At first glance, Nicodemus has come as an official teacher to converse with an unofficial, but impressive, miracle worker. On a deeper level, however, a Jewish Pharisee encounters the very Son of God! Throughout John's Gospel, we see "signs" which point to Jesus as the Son of God. In our previous chapter, the turning of water into wine was seen as the first sign in John's Gospel, a sign which resulted in the disciples' belief (2:11). Also note that Nicodemus uses the first-person

plural “we” as an indication that not only Nicodemus but, perhaps, other Pharisees or members of the Sanhedrin have been impressed by Jesus’ power, as well. Nicodemus needs to get to the bottom of Jesus’ identity. “I see your signs,” Nicodemus seems to be saying, “so then, who are you?”

Kingdom of God (3:3)

Jesus wastes no time with conversational niceties, but gets to the crux of the conversation. Nicodemus cannot obtain a place in the kingdom of God by “law-keeping.” Indeed, what is required is a radical rebirth.

Participating in God’s kingdom involves participating in eternity, the “age to come.” While the “kingdom of God,” is the dominating topic of the other Gospels, John only makes mention of it here in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus (cf. 18:36). The “kingdom of God” is the place where God reigns and rules for eternity. Jesus is clear: In order to have a place at the table in the kingdom of God, one must be “born again” (*anōthen*).

Interestingly, this word *anōthen* can take on several meanings. Jesus could be saying that one must be born “from above.” Or, likewise, he could be saying that one must be “born again.” Given the fact that Nicodemus interpreted Jesus’ words as meaning “again,” that’s probably the best starting point for our translation and understanding. As we have already seen in John’s Gospel, however, Jesus often uses words with multiple meanings. And we should also note that on other occasions when John uses the word *anōthen*, it is best translated as “from above” (3:31; 19:11). Therefore, one must be “born again from above” to have a place in the future eternal age.

Mother’s Womb (3:4)

Nicodemus’ thoughts were along these lines: Man can’t start life over again. A fourth grader in Amarillo, who seldom pays attention and rarely contributes to the classroom conversation, astonished his teacher a few weeks ago when he suddenly informed his peers, “You can look back, but you can’t go back.”

True in many ways. Each of us is the sum total of all of his yesterdays. Through the years we have built up a bundle of doubts, uncertainties, wishes, fears, hopes, and habits—both good and bad. Is Jesus actually suggesting that we can break from our past and have a new beginning? How could this possibly be? We can’t begin the journey of life all over again by re-entering our mother’s womb, can we?

Water and Spirit (3:5-7)

Whenever you see “truly, truly” (or “verily, verily”) in a quotation from Jesus, you can know that it is taken from John’s Gospel. This double construction only occurs in the fourth Gospel (see three occurrences in chapter 3 alone: 3:3, 5, 11).

Water is a reference to natural or physical birth. Therefore, one must be born the first time (of the flesh) and a second time (of the Spirit). In verse 6, he explains that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. “Of water” in verse 6 parallels “of the flesh” in verse 7, and “of the Spirit” in verse 6, obviously, parallels “of the Spirit” in verse 7.

Unlike the Apostle Paul (Romans 8:7-8; Galatians 5:16-17), John does not use “flesh” in a pejorative way to refer to humanity’s sin nature. Just as in 1:14, flesh in verse 7 simply refers to human nature. Interestingly, Jesus moves to a plural pronoun, best translated as “all of you” must be born again. This switch to a plural may cause the reader to recall that Nicodemus also said that he spoke for the many, “we know that you have come from God as a teacher” (3:2).

Spirit (3:8)

The Greek word interpreted “wind” (*pneuma*) can be translated as either “breath,” “wind,” or “Spirit.” Therefore, in the Greek text the ideas of wind, Spirit, and breath combine to provide a multiple-layered meaning. Jesus is informing Nicodemus that just like the wind has its mysteries, as we know neither its origin nor destination, he who is born of the Spirit cannot be understood or controlled by persons who have only experienced the birth of the flesh. An allusion to Ezekiel 37 seems to be behind Jesus’ thoughts. In Ezekiel, God’s breath/Spirit/wind (*pneuma* in the Greek version of the Old Testament, LXX) comes upon the valley of dry bones and calls them back to life. Just so, those born of the Spirit have their origin and destiny in the unseen, mysterious God.

Teacher of Israel (3:10-12)

Nicodemus had spent countless years teaching others about the conditions required for entrance into the kingdom of God. The very one, however, who had promoted commandment keeping as the key to entrance into the kingdom is now faced with the fact that he himself has missed the way into the eternal age. Jesus, in fact, uses an article to address Nicodemus as “the” teacher of Israel, lending weight to the idea that Nicodemus was a well-recognized master of religious matters. We might interpret it thusly, “You, the reverend professor doctor, have missed the way into God’s kingdom by focusing on God’s commands rather than God’s condition—a radical birth from above.”

With verse 11, the dialogue now becomes a monologue, meaning Nicodemus has been trumped into silence by the unofficial teacher, Jesus, and now can do nothing else but listen and learn. Jesus is not offering another opinion regarding the kingdom of God. On the contrary, he has perfect knowledge. Jesus declares, “We speak that which we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.”

“The teacher of Israel’s” problem at this point is not that he lacks head knowledge, but, rather, that he is missing a transformation of the heart. His is not only a failure to understand, but a failure to believe Jesus’ witness. Once again, Jesus uses the plural pronoun, “we,” to match the tone Nicodemus had already set in verse 2.

Heaven (3:13)

Jesus can speak authoritatively concerning the kingdom of God because He himself has descended from heaven, and no man has ever ascended to heaven from which Jesus came (Proverbs 30:4). More than any other Gospel, John insists on Jesus’ heavenly origin. We would do well to remember that his story begins with “In the beginning...the Word was with God.” In contrast to Jesus’ heavenly origin, men are “of earth, earthy” (1 Corinthians 15:47).

Lifted Up (3:14-15)

Jesus is making a clear reference to Numbers 21 where the Israelites are bitten by fiery serpents, making death imminent. In order to save the Israelites from certain demise, Moses was instructed by God to make a serpent of bronze and lift it up on a pole. Whoever looked at the bronze serpent was healed. As the serpent was “lifted up” in the wilderness, Jesus insists that the “Son of Man must also be lifted up.”

Paradoxically, “lifted up” refers to both Jesus’ being crucified high on the cross and to his resulting glory following his resurrection. (The same verb “lifting up” is used for a reference to heavenly exaltation in Acts 2:33.) The irony of the gospel of grace is, in fact, that even in the act of humiliation, Jesus was being glorified.

In verse 15, we have the first mention in this conversation to “eternal life.” We should note that “eternal” is always used in this Gospel of life as a reference to life in the age to come, the age of eternity.

Eternal Life (3:16)

While the Jews had a clear understanding that they were loved by their God, it was often lost on them that God actually loved “the world.” God’s love has never been confined to any national group or select people. From the very beginning, the election of ancient Israel was “so that all the world could be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

The crucifixion of Christ on the cross reveals the love of God and makes clear the purpose of the incarnation—why the Word became flesh. By describing Jesus as God’s “one and only Son,” John sets forth the greatness of God’s gift.

Salvation and Judgment (3:17-18)

Elsewhere, we are told, in fact, that Jesus came into the world for judgment (9:39; cf. 5:22, 27, 30; 8:16, 26; 12:31). In the act of saving those who believe, the gospel has, likewise, judged those who have not embraced God’s gift of his one and only Son. The most powerful point of the gospel is that one’s eternity is based upon whether one accepts or rejects God’s gift of grace. Despite the fact that ultimate judgment is a future matter, the present reality of God’s grace in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus has set in motion what will happen to believers and unbelievers on Judgment Day. God’s wrath presently remains on those who reject the gift of his Son.

Darkness and Light (19-21)

When men choose darkness over the light of the gospel, they have trapped themselves in evil and left themselves condemned. Earlier, John told us that there is a true light which has come into the world and lightens every man (1:9). Despite the fact that God has given us the gift of light, the Son, many men have chosen to continue their journey in darkness (cf. 1:4-5).

Conclusion

Nicodemus makes two more appearances in John’s Gospel. In chapter 7, he comes to Jesus’ defense, arguing that Jewish law does not permit a man to be judged without first giving him a hearing (7:37-52). As a result of his “taking sides with Jesus,” he is accused of having joined Jesus’ Galilean followers. Later, in chapter 19, he joins another member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea, in giving Jesus’ body a decent burial. His provision of expensive myrrh and aloes

implies that Nicodemus is a wealthy man. These later passages are most probably an indication that, indeed, in the end Nicodemus is born again, from above. The conversation of John 3 eventually led to the conversion of “the teacher of Israel.”

“I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat
at the door,
And never put on again.”

Many of us here feel trapped in a dark cave. The flood waters are rising, and we live in fear. Jesus comes to our rescue and gives His life that ours might be saved. We are free – free from the past, free in His forgiveness.