

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 13

John – Part Three Jesus & Nicodemus Chapters 3-21

Verse 1. Many people saw Jesus' signs and "believed" in a superficial way. Jesus knew their hearts and so he did not entrust himself to them (literally "believe in" them; 2:23-25). One such individual was Nicodemus, a Pharisee, rabbi, Sanhedrin member, probably wealthy and highly respected. John 3:1-21 relates the story of Jesus' encounter with this man, who later apparently gradually came to committed faith in Jesus (John 7:50-52; 19:39). This encounter involves irony, double meanings and contrasts. We will note some as we go along.

Verse 2. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. For fear or simply a convenient time? We do not know for sure. For John's Gospel, Nicodemus was spiritually in the dark as he came in contact with the Light of the world. He is a "believer" based on signs, but he lacks kingdom understanding or spiritual life.

Verse 3. The kingdom of God is the realm in which God's people are found. John mentions the kingdom only in this context and in John 18:36. Jesus says that no one can see the kingdom who is not born *anōthen* – a Greek word meaning both "again" and "from above."

Verse 4. Nicodemus hears with earthly ears only, thinking of a second physical birth.

Verse 5. Jesus makes the point more forcefully. It is necessary to be born "of water and the Spirit." This expression might refer to such Old Testament passages as Isaiah 44:1-3 and Ezekiel 36:25-27 which speak of God's renewing work in terms of water and Spirit. It might refer to John's baptism in water and Jesus' baptism in Spirit (John 1:26,33) It might, in retrospect, speak of Christian baptism which is an outward sign (water) with an inward (Holy Spirit) reality (Titus 3:5; Acts 2:38). It might be contrasting physical birth ("water") and spiritual regeneration ("Spirit").

Verses 6-7. Jesus explains his previous statement. Fleshly life reproduces only fleshly life; spiritual life must be begotten by God's Spirit (from above). See John 1:12-13. "You" is plural in the imperative: "You must be born again." Jesus states a universal principle.

Verse 8. Here is another play on words. In Greek, "spirit," "Spirit" and "wind" all translate the same word, *pneuma*. Spiritual regeneration is as mysterious as the wind. We cannot see its origin or movement but we see evidence of its presence. Spiritual regeneration is God's work (see John 1:12-13 again). No one decides to be born! Yet we are commanded to believe in Jesus to have eternal life. As "The Baptist Faith & Message" states: "Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a *change of heart* wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner *responds* in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" [Emphasis added].

Verse 9. Nicodemus still doesn't get it.

Verse 10. Nicodemus had approached Jesus by recognizing him as a teacher ("Rabbi") from God (v. 2). Now Jesus asks Nicodemus: "You are Israel's teacher?" Nicodemus had said, "We know . . ." (v. 2). Now Jesus says, "You do not understand" (literally "know").

Verse 11. "We" might refer to Jesus and to John the Baptizer before him.

Verses 12-13. Jesus is God's authoritative spokesman who came from God in heaven and will go back to the Father there.

Verses 14-15. It is possible that Jesus' conversation stops with verse 13 and the Gospel writer comments at this point. However, it is natural to still hear Jesus speaking even through verse 21. If so, Jesus here refers to the brass snake which God had Moses build and erect on a pole in Numbers 21, when the people had sinned by grumbling and God sent poisonous snakes among them. Whoever looked in faith at the brass snake was healed. So will Jesus be "lifted up" – on the cross, which for John's Gospel is also his glorification ("lifted up" in another sense) and whoever looks to him in faith will be saved.

Verses 16-17. This was God's purpose in sending Jesus – to give eternal life. This gift of his Son showed God's immeasurable love. The final destinies are eternal life (for believers) or perishing (for disbelievers). God is not trying to condemn people and Jesus did not come to condemn. Our attitude should be grounded in God's purpose which is to save.

Verses 18-21. Finally, it is not God the Father or Jesus who condemns anyone. Those who are finally lost condemn themselves by rejecting the light and by willful disbelief. These verses illustrate that God judges people by the light they have. No one who is lost can justly complain against God or blame him for it.

Points For Home (recited in class):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.