

## John 3:1-17

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.”

<sup>3</sup>Jesus replied, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! <sup>6</sup>Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>“How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.

<sup>10</sup>“You are the teacher of Israel,” Jesus answered, “and you do not know these things?

<sup>11</sup>Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.

<sup>14</sup>“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

## How Can These Things Be?

### I.

It happens all the time. There’s a new thing...a new curiosity...something that *everyone* is all abuzz about. You simply have to go and check it out for yourself. Is all the hype really *true*, or is it just hype, the way so many things turn out to be?

The hype, in this particular case, was all about the latest brilliant mind that had burst on the scene. Of *course* there was opposition, because his intellect and understanding seemed to surpass that of all the others. They probably felt threatened. This new guy might start to take away their own audience.

It was around the time of the Passover—an earlier Passover celebration than the one we have been talking about recently—this one was at least a year or two before the Passover when the Lord’s Supper was instituted.

The brilliant scholarly mind that had burst onto the scene was Jesus. While there was no lack of people who were called Rabbi, *this* teacher was different. He spoke with an unheard of authority.

Was it all just hype, or was the hype really true? Nicodemus just had to see for himself.

“He came to Jesus at night” (John 3:2, EHV). A typical home in Jerusalem would have had a chamber for guests up on the roof. A stairwell outside would have led up to the place where Jesus was staying. Perhaps he came at night because it was a quiet time and no one would interrupt his discussion with the Rabbi. On the other hand, most people would not be out and about at night in those days and in that culture, so he would stand a better chance of getting in to see Jesus unobserved by others.

Whatever the case, he came. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him” (John 3:2, EHV).

Jesus was impressive! There were lots of sign-seers around the area—people who had witnessed the things Jesus had done—miracles, they were, those things he had done. One of the Jewish sayings was that no sinner could perform a miracle—in other words, no breaker of the Law of Moses could do things that were so obviously miracles. Nicodemus wanted to explore the hype for himself.

## II.

Curiosity. It would be nice to hear some of these teachings from Jesus, but the real draw was the peripherals.

Nicodemus was all caught up in external things. To put it in today’s terms, he would have been most interested in how the building looks and how pretty the lawn and the landscaping are. How is the music? Does it move a person to the very inmost being? Does it stir up deep feelings and exhilarate? What about the pastor? Is he a dynamic speaker? Does he grab the listener’s attention and hold it?

So Nicodemus had come. In the dead of night, in case anyone else would notice. But perhaps he could be a first-hand sign-seer who could judge for himself the greatness of this new Rabbi.

“Jesus replied, ‘Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God’” (John 3:3, EHV).

There is really no point in answering a faulty premise. Jesus began his discussion with Nicodemus where Nicodemus needed to begin—with his works-righteousness.

The whole premise of Judaism was that, to get right with God, a person needed to carefully and rigidly follow the Laws of Moses. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus bought into that line of thinking hook, line, and sinker. He was all in. He held himself to the highest of standards. Deep inside he knew something was missing, but it wasn’t for a lack of trying. He would get there—eventually. He would be good enough to get God’s attention. The very fact that *he* had *chosen* to follow God counted for something, didn’t it?

Jesus’ statement threw cold water on everything. He was trying hard to get *to* above; Jesus was saying something had to come *from* above.

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’” (John 3:4, EHV).

How? How? How? For Nicodemus it wasn’t just about the beautiful temple structure in Jerusalem, after all. The ceremonies and the rituals were all what he was used to—they were all beautiful in their own way. What he was focused on was the how. What’s the process? How can I get a leg up? If I’m better at this than the next guy, God will hold me in greater regard.

So...Jesus...how? What do I have to do to do this “being born” thing? Explain yourself to me. I want to do whatever it takes—if, that is, I haven’t already been following the right path.

## III.

“Jesus answered, ‘Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! <sup>6</sup>Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. <sup>7</sup>Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above’” (John 3:5-7, EHV).

Nicodemus, you are going about this all wrong. *You* are trying to *do* something. You are looking for something, *anything*, that is in your own control. “Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh.” Human attempts are futile. Human decisions are meaningless when it comes to faith, Nicodemus.

Just as no person chooses to be born as a human being, you cannot choose God. Rebirth is something done *to* you. “Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.” *That’s* what I’m telling you this night, Nicodemus. You are attempting to do something that just can’t be done—not by *you*, at least. The Holy Spirit does these things without your own choice or intervention.

#### IV.

“How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus” (John 3:9, EHV). How, indeed?

“You are the teacher of Israel,’ Jesus answered, ‘and you do not know these things? <sup>11</sup>Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’” (John 3:10-12, EHV).

There is so much in Christianity that makes no sense to the human intellect. Being born from above was just the beginning of the incredible things Jesus told him.

It is the Triune God who accomplishes it all. The salvation of every human being is all wrapped up in the One who is the Savior-God. As one who is the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus would know the words of Moses: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God. The LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4, EHV).

Jesus tells him what that One God has done. He did not leave salvation to chance. People like Nicodemus were flawed. No matter how hard we try, not one of us can ever achieve the perfection that One God demanded. “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16, EHV). God wrote out a blank check to offer forgiveness, full and free to everyone.

The blank check God wrote out had to be earned, but not by Nicodemus or any of us. John the Baptist had recently identified who Jesus was. He said: “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, EHV). Just as Israel had been doing for thousands of years, a sacrifice was needed to appease God’s wrath over sin. But it wasn’t the sacrifice of a common lamb from the flocks and herds of Israel. It was the very Lamb of God—it was God’s own Son. Here Jesus teaches that fact by saying, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15, EHV).

This is why it takes the Holy Spirit to work faith in the heart. This is why Jesus said: a person must be born from above. “Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6, EHV).

*Nothing* about Christianity makes sense. That God would identify himself as Three Persons in One God? That the Son of God was both truly, 100%, God, and truly, 100%, human? That God would die so that we would not die? That the Holy Spirit would give a new birth from above so that people would believe these things to be true? It’s all beyond belief.

Yet it’s all true. How can these things be? Salvation comes by faith alone—faith given by the Holy Spirit. Salvation comes by God’s grace alone. The Holy Spirit works that faith as he chooses. Salvation is by Scripture alone. The Holy Spirit uses the tool of the gospel in God’s Word and in the Sacraments to create that faith. That’s how these things can be. Amen.