

## John 3:1-17

<sup>1</sup>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?

### I.

I can picture him casting some furtive glances as he approached the house. It was nighttime. That was, of course, a great time for deep philosophical discussions because others with more casual questions wouldn’t be there to interrupt. It would seem, however, that he wasn’t ready for anyone to find out yet about this late-night visit. He had questions that needed to be asked in private, first. After he got his answers...well, *then* he could make a decision about whether or not to go public with the fact that he had met with the man he called “Rabbi.”

So it was that Nicodemus approached the house, trying to make sure no one saw him go in. He had questions for Jesus. “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). It was obviously a question, but Nicodemus didn’t state it in the form of a question. A Jewish truth had it that a person who was a sinner couldn’t possibly perform a miracle. He was aware of the miracles Jesus had done; perhaps he had even witnessed some himself.

His bias was that it was therefore necessary for Jesus to be someone who was not a breaker of the law. That didn’t mean that he understood yet that Jesus was perfect. Someone who kept the laws of Moses was just a very godly individual, not perfect; at least, perhaps that was how Nicodemus might have understood things.

How? That was Nicodemus’ question. How was Jesus able to do these miraculous things? It must mean that he was someone special. Nicodemus came stealthily, peeking around the corners of buildings, because he didn’t want anyone to interfere with him getting some straight answers about who Jesus was. This might prove to be very important. He wanted to be sure.

You have noticed, I’m sure, how Jesus doesn’t always answer the question that has been asked—or implied, in this case. “Jesus replied, ‘Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God’” (John 3:3, EHV). You might have learned the

passage with the words “born again,” rather than “born from above.” Either is a correct translation, because the word means both things. Every English translation I looked at chose one, but put the other in a footnote.

It is entirely possible that Jesus chose this word because he wanted to say both things at once. Nicodemus grabs the “again” meaning and latches on to it. “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). Was Jesus driving at some deeper meaning? Nicodemus wondered. If so, what could it be? How? How could a person be born again?

## II.

The “How?” question is still asked. How can a person be born again? What does born again mean?

Many in the Christian community use “born again” as a prefix to Christian. There are Christians—regular Christians, perhaps you would call them—and “born again” Christians. That second category is filled with special believers. Perhaps these special believers make an extra effort to live for God. In another way of looking at it, a person only gets a little “invitation” to faith from God, but then, to be “born again” requires a decision on the part of the individual. Once a person has chosen Christ, he or she will be “born again” and get baptized.

No matter which of those ways a person characterizes things, and perhaps there are more that I have missed, they all miss the point; they miss the double meaning of the word Jesus chose. They also miss what Jesus said elsewhere in Scripture. Frequently we point to Jesus saying: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16, EHV). While Jesus was saying this to his disciples, it applies to every believer. *Jesus* does the choosing, not us.

If we were to choose, it might be like so many who flocked to him during his earthly ministry—they just wanted a bite of food, or some healing; they wanted to make him King to cater to their every earthly desire. Without God the Holy Spirit directing us, and *giving* us faith, the only reasons we would have for choosing Jesus would be selfish ones.

Whether a person hears Jesus say “again” or “from above” after the word born, the “How?” really should come to the same conclusion. Being “born” indicates that something happens *to* a person, not *by* a person. John made the point early in his gospel account, even before he got to Jesus speaking with Nicodemus. “But to all who did receive [Jesus], to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. <sup>13</sup>They were born, not of blood, or of the desire of the flesh, or of a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13, EHV).

Jesus doesn’t really clarify whether he intended us to understand “again” or “from above.” He used the same word yet again as he answered Nicodemus: “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” (John 3:6-8, EHV). What Jesus *does* clarify is that *all* the credit for faith belongs to God. Faith comes from above, not from a human decision. Faith is being born of the Spirit.

Rather than trying to insist that the Christian individual had something to do with coming to faith, from time to time believers wonder they really *are* believers. How? How can I be sure? Look back to Jesus’ words: “Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The faith in your heart is there because it was implanted in you by the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t *your* choice, it was God’s doing. That gives comfort to the troubled heart. I don’t have to wonder whether I have believed strongly enough; I recognize Jesus as my Savior. That’s *God’s* doing, not mine. I can be sure.

## III.

“‘How can these things be?’ asked Nicodemus” (John 3:9, EHV). Even after Jesus pointed out that a believer’s “birth” is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, Nicodemus wondered: “How?”

Jesus said: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I

tell you heavenly things?” (John 3:12, EHV). Divine math doesn’t work like human math: 1+1+1 person within the Godhead equals 1 Triune God, not 3 gods. Divine science doesn’t work like earthly science: Jesus performed miracles that are outside the scope of science; what he did was impossible.

Divine logic is not like earthly logic: “No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven” (John 3:13, EHV). Many translations omit that last phrase: “who is in heaven.” It isn’t in all the manuscripts that are available in the ancient languages. Many scholars tend to think that longer readings might have been attempts by scribes to clarify the text. That certainly isn’t the case with this phrase. “Who is in heaven” doesn’t clarify anything, it is impossible logic. It created another “How” question. How could Jesus, who was talking to Nicodemus, also be in heaven? As the God who is present everywhere, Jesus was in heaven, even as he was a human being talking to Nicodemus.

It is that Jesus, the God who descended from heaven, yet was in heaven at the same time, who came to accomplish salvation. “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). It was still a long way off, but Jesus indicated that it was absolutely necessary that he be lifted up on the cross for the sins of all people.

“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” (John 3:16, EHV). Not many translations want to mess with such a familiar passage; it just rolls off the tongue the way most of us remember it. The sense in the Greek is: “God loved the world in this way, that he gave his only-begotten Son.”

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17, EHV). Jesus absolutely had to be like the snake on the pole in the desert to fulfill God’s plan. When the Israelites looked at the snake on that pole during their journey to the Promised Land, they were healed of their snake bites. It wasn’t some magic talisman hanging there, it was God’s promise: “Look...and live.”

The snake on the pole looked ahead to what God’s promise was for the world. Look to him—look to the work he did, hanging there on the cross—and live.

#### IV.

How? So many “hows” have been answered. Jesus is both truly God and truly human, though the logic doesn’t make sense to human beings. Jesus fulfilled God’s promise to send a Savior. He died on the cross, as the snake in the desert prefigured. That work Jesus did to save the world becomes yours when you are born from above, not because of your own choice, but because of the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart.

Being born happened to you. You have been born to live a new life. The Lenten season reminds us that it is good to regularly repent of our sins and turn again to the God who sent Jesus to die for us.

The Holy Spirit not only planted that faith in your heart, he nourishes your faith through your use of God’s Word and Sacrament. Neglecting worship and neglecting the sacrament is to turn away from the God who has done so much for you. Don’t turn away.

Nicodemus once came stealthily to learn more about Jesus. He wasn’t so stealthy anymore on Good Friday afternoon. It was Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea who took on themselves the duty of giving Jesus’ body the dignity of a burial before the Sabbath Day would make it impossible for them to do so. He wasn’t afraid to be known as a disciple of Jesus any longer.

You once might have been stealthy in your faith or in your confession of faith. Be bold. “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” (John 3:16, EHV). That well-known passage—the passage known as the Gospel in a nutshell—reminds us that God sent Jesus for the *world*, not just for some. It is important for everyone you know to hear that God sent him for them. You have learned the “How,” as Nicodemus did. Now go and tell. Amen.