

3:1-8 (recap)

The conversation with Nicodemus marks the first of seven discourses:

1. The New Birth (3:1-36)
2. The Water of Life (4:1-42)
3. The Divine Son (5:19-47)
4. The Bread of Life (6:22-66)
5. The Life-Giving Spirit (7:1-52)
6. The Light of the World (8:12-59)
7. The Good Shepherd (10:1-42)

These discourses are usually (though not always) associated with conversations that Jesus has with individuals or groups of people.

These conversations tend to follow a pattern:

1. Someone interacts with Jesus
2. Jesus makes an initial, often unclear, statement based on the interaction
3. Jesus' answer is misunderstood
4. Jesus gives a second, often unclear, answer
5. Jesus then gives a discourse by way of explanation

So in our current text:

1. (3:1-2) Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night, recognizing Him as a teacher
2. (3:3) Jesus proactively states that seeing the kingdom is the result of a new birth
3. (3:4) Nicodemus unintentionally/intentionally misunderstands Jesus' meaning
4. (3:5-8) Jesus gives a second similar statement that entering the kingdom is accomplished through "water" and "the Spirit"
5. (3:9-21) Jesus elaborates on the mission of the Son and the necessity of believing in Him for "eternal life"

The concept of rebirth is not a new one to Jewish society

"One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born." – Talmud

Rebirth is a common theme in many world religions of that day (mystery cults, Greek paganism, etc)

Rebirth/recreation will a point of emphasis throughout the NT.

Jesus has already characterized this new birth in three ways:

1. It is "from above" (*anothen*, 3:3)
 - Nicodemus recognized Jesus as being "from God" (1:2).
 - Jesus states that this new birth is also from God.
2. It is of water
 - Water baptism mentioned in chapter 1 and immediately following this account.
 - Unlikely to be coincidental, especially since the disciples begin to baptize (3:22; 4:2).
3. It is of the Spirit
 - John the Baptist had already spoken of this (1:33).
 - The Spirit is the agent of spiritual regeneration (Titus 3:5).

Which brings us to Nicodemus' ultimate question: how? (3:8)

Nicodemus' question seems not so much incredulous, but rather inquisitive: he possibly understands the necessity of Jesus' teaching, but not the means by which it is accomplished.

3:9-16

“Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?”

- Nicodemus is a highly visible representative of the teachers of Israel who should have understood the scriptures and led the people in understanding them, but failed to do so.
- Side note: I think this underlines the importance of preparation for Bible teaching in churches and homes.
 - If we’re going to teach scripture, we need to be as informed as possible about what it says, the context in which it was said and its’ importance to the overall message.

“We speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen...”

- This is the inverse of Nicodemus’ first statement (*“We know that You have come from God”*), distinguishing the two levels of knowledge.
- Who is the “we” that Jesus refers to?
- Possibilities:
 - Jesus & the disciples
 - Jesus & John the Baptist
 - Jesus & God (some translations have capitalized the pronouns “We” and “Our”)
 - Jesus & the prophets [OT]
 - Jesus & all believers (or, *“everyone born of the Spirit”*)
 - This is a good possibility since:
 - a) It is the nearest antecedent,
 - b) it would also include the activity of the Spirit (the facilitator of God’s Word and the means of spiritual renewal), and
 - c) it would contrast this group from the Pharisees, of whom Nicodemus was a member.

“...but you do not accept Our testimony.”

- “You” is plural (as in, “you all”)
 - Referring to the Pharisees, Jewish leaders, unbelievers, etc.
 - See 1:10-11

“If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?”

- Jesus asks how they will understand heavenly concepts if they completely missed the meaning of their earthly counterparts.
 - There seems to be a double reference here:
 - Jesus speaks in the immediate sense, referring to the earthly examples He just provided
 - This also most likely refers to the general lack of insight of the physical symbols of the OT
 - Heb. 8:5 – *“These serve as a shadow of the heavenly things...”*

“No one has ascended into heaven except the One who descended from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life.”

- Jesus begins this analogy with the heavenly concept: the Son of Man.
- He then relates this concept to the account found in Num. 21:4-9, where the people anger God with their complaining, to the point that He sends poisonous snakes among them, killing many of them.
 - The people ask forgiveness, so God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole.
 - Anyone who looks at the bronze serpent is healed.
- Although Jesus doesn’t elaborate on the analogy, there are several applications:
 - The ancient Israelites were guilty of disobedience and grumbling against God.

- They fell under the condemnation of God and were punished for their sin.
- The object elevated in front of them was the representation of their judgment.
- They weren't able to rescue themselves.
- The poison of the serpents was deadly and there was no antidote.
- They were told to look at the bronze serpent in order to receive life.
- Remember: "seeing/looking" is a repeated emphasis in John, representative of belief.
 - Just as Israel had to believe in the command to look toward the serpent, one must look toward the crucified Jesus in belief to have eternal life.

The text doesn't say whether or not Nicodemus immediately understood these concepts, but his later activity in chapters 7 and 19 show that he gave them serious consideration (more than can be said for the Pharisees and the rest of the Sanhedrin)

[It's not clear if 3:16-21 are a continuation of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, or if they are the commentary of John, elaborating the concepts of the preceding verses.]

3:16-21

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world so that He might condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

- The word "for" connects this thought with the previous one:
 - *"The Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life."*
 - *"He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*
- Active belief is the means by which God has determined to save mankind.
 - Two descriptions of activity here:
 - God's activity – "He gave His only begotten Son"
 - Man's activity – "whoever believes in Him"
- The word "so" can describe the extent of God's love, or the method by which it is expressed (i.e. "God loved the world in this way").
 - The vocabulary shows the characteristics of God's expression of love:
 - Sacrificial - "He gave"
 - Global - "whoever"
 - Merciful – "should not perish"
 - Gracious - "have everlasting life"
- "Eternal/everlasting life" vs "perish"
 - Israel looked toward the bronze snake and immediately received life in their temporal, earthly bodies; believers look toward Jesus and immediately receive eternal life.
- Lest we are often tempted to forget, God's purpose toward mankind is positive.
 - He is not looking for an excuse to condemn mankind; rather, He is taking active steps to save it.

"Anyone that believes on Him is not condemned: but anyone who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

- With God's intentions stated plainly, John now issues the ultimatum to mankind, drawing a clear line between the believer and the unbeliever.
 - This emphasis on belief connects back to John's original intent for writing the book:
 - 20:31, *"So that you might believe, and in so doing, inherit eternal life."*
 - The repetition of "only" also underlines the message of the prologue: *"The One and Only Son... He has revealed Him."*

- God is revealed through Jesus; we have only but to actively look and believe.
- If we fail to do so, we have condemned ourselves (cf Acts 13:46).

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”

- Another link to the message of the prologue is the reintroduction of the “dark vs light” theme (1:4-9):
 - Evil deeds are specifically linked to darkness.
 - Paul mentions this in Eph. 4:17-19:
 - *“Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their thoughts. They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts. They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.”*
 - Darkness and light are exclusive of one another.
 - There is a reciprocal nature to this conflict:
 - God can’t be in the presence of sin, but sin also can’t stand to be in the presence of God.
 - Because of man’s increasing desire for darkness, he actively shuns the light and therefore is self-condemned.

“But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

- In contrast to the lover of darkness is the lover of light.
 - The one who seeks the light does so by openly believing and obeying the truth.
 - This is closely related to the “light” that Jesus instructs each believer to “shine” in Mt. 5:16.
- The difference between the believer and the unbeliever isn’t simply in the good or evil of their actions, but in their attitudes towards the truth as it is revealed through Jesus.