

John 3

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 06 January 2015 15:50

In this chapter we have one of the most mistaken and misused texts in the New Testament... 3:16. Though its meaning is clear, those who prefer human theories to what scripture really says, continue to misuse it, or even abuse it, to satisfy their own idea of Who God is and what He does. I have no time for this kind of game-playing, and neither should you.

Verses 1&2

1.

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

2.

The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Nicodemus ('conqueror') was a "ruler of the Jews". That is, a powerful member of the Sanhedrin. He did not fight against Jesus. For new readers who do not know the facts concerning Pharisees... they were a sect that arose about the time of the last Jewish exile, but they did not last very long. They stood by the authority of oral tradition and rites, etc., and sought to gain praise and distinction by their outward keeping of the law, and their good works. They believed the Messiah would come, and that there were good and evil angels.

They thought the dead would be rewarded or punished in Hades, but would be brought back to (good) life by the Messiah. As Jews they hated the Romans and required a theocracy and a return to a Jewish nation, self-governing. As such the ordinary people supported them. At the time of Jesus there appeared to be about 6000 of them (Josephus). They bitterly opposed Jesus, Who rebuked them often.

Nicodemus, afraid of the reaction of the rest of the Sanhedrin, decided to visit Jesus at night under cover of darkness, and addressing Him as "Rabbi". This can mean two things – a way of addressing someone considered to be great, and/or an honoured teacher. Given Jesus' miracles and speaking thus far, I have no doubt Nicodemus meant both to apply. Indeed, he alluded to the miracles, saying that no man could perform them unless "God be with him". In this statement we do not see Nicodemus calling Jesus God, but someone, an human being, who

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was given great power by God, perhaps a prophet.

Nicodemus used the word “*theos*” for ‘God’, thus referring to the Trinity. (There are a few more meanings not referred to here as they are not directly applicable). After calling Him ‘Rabbi’ he referred to Jesus as a “teacher” (a different word from *rabbi/rhabbi*...

didaskalos

; someone adept at teaching the things of God. It can also be used of great teachers, such as Paul, Jesus, Peter, etc., and so can be used akin to ‘apostle’. Such teachers teach by the hand of the Holy Spirit and were often called ‘Master’ (similar to our doctors of theology).

(Readers should note that the term ‘didaskalos’ can also apply to false teachers within the churches. Furthermore, this does not necessarily mean the teacher is not a Christian – many Christians can be led astray by their own devices, by listening to those who are deliberately false, or by Satan, to confuse the churches and themselves. In this they bring defamation to the Church and to the Lord. Those who have been taught should never allow a false teacher to teach (because they can affect many, many others, ruining their lives), and must always admonish or rebuke them, for the sake of God’s honour and that others may not be led astray. Today, there are MANY false teachers in the churches).

Verses 3-8

1.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

2.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?

3.

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

4.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

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5.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

6.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

Jesus ignored the praise, though it was based on actual fact, and immediately spoke of the vital issue Nicodemus needed to understand. We know it was most vital because it was preceded by a double 'Verily', or (perhaps a surprise to some) '*Amēn*'. Jesus used the word to indicate how firm and trustworthy His statements to Nicodemus were; He was saying 'Listen, this is the absolute truth'. Used at the end of a talk or teaching, it was a typical Jewish acceptance of the teaching, meaning "so be it", with a belief that it would come about (from the Hebrew *amam*, to believe, or 'faithful'). Use of the Jewish 'Amen' was passed-on to the later Christian assemblies for the same purpose of agreeing with what was taught.

'Unless a man is born again he will not enter Heaven'. Perhaps Nicodemus was not expecting such a blunt and hard-hitting statement as soon as he arrived. He probably had a set of questions of his own. But, Jesus knew his heart and his need, and did not waste time on niceties or peripherals! This is how all Christian teachers should be – to the point, direct, not wasting time on building up a neat case using pretty language! This is because we do not know how much time we have with him/her; truth must be taught when the opportunity arises... we wait at our peril.

The word 'except' strongly means never or not; unless this is done what should follow will not happen. What must happen? To enter Heaven a man must be 'born again'. In theological terms it means to be 'regenerated'. That is, the dead spirit of a man must firstly be brought to life, before it can begin to listen to the Holy Spirit. This must occur in EVERY man and woman before salvation occurs. Once his or her spirit is alive it will respond, without fail, to God's prompting found in the Gospel.

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Without this regeneration there can be no salvation. The regeneration of a spirit will ALWAYS result in salvation, because the salvation has been declared in eternity by God, Who cannot make a mistake or regenerate someone without effect. Thus, being born again is the 'opening' by which salvation can happen, and is always successful. No person who has been regenerated can possibly end life without salvation.

Jesus, then, was giving a hard saying to Nicodemus. He HAD to be reborn. Jesus was making a preliminary statement, setting forth the truth. We should always do this with men and women, before explaining what the truth means – first the godly truth, then the explanation. And this is what Jesus did this night.

The same kind of thinking should accompany teaching Bible reading to others: do not become the pawn of finance houses (publishers) who seem to invent a 'new' version every year. Adhere to the best possible version, the KJAV, and stick to it. Then work out what it says. A true Bible teacher should be able to do this well, because the Holy Spirit is with him and he is given the gifts to do it. Supposed teachers who cannot do this are probably false and self-appointed as 'teachers'. (Also read our series on the KJAV, which show why the KJAV is the best version).

Nicodemus was genuinely perplexed by this. 'How can I be born again when I have already been born of a woman? I am an older man – how do I re-enter my mother's womb!'

Jesus patiently carried on, again reiterating that what He was saying was vital: "Verily, verily" or "Amēn, amēn". Bear in mind that Nicodemus trained as all Jewish teachers at that time did, in the daily schools of debate held by the rabbis. There is evidence that even Jesus spent at least some time in such a school when He was young). There, they argued and debated all theological matters to the 'nth' degree, identifying and defining everything in their religion. As we would say today, they 'knew it back to front and inside out'. They were far from being ignorant men and were the top theologians of their day. But, what Jesus gave in His explanation must have further perplexed him!

Jesus gave a variegated answer: to be born again a man must experience natural birth through the human womb (water: the medium in which babies are carried and which burst when birth is near). Then, after this natural birth, he must also be born of the Spirit (regenerated). Only then could he enter Heaven as a saved man. To be born of the Spirit is rebirth or being 'born again'. It is when the Holy Spirit causes the completely dead human spirit to come alive, to enable it to hear and answer God in repentance, which precedes salvation. (For more on salvation and its

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perceived stages, see the relevant article).

The question that should have been on the lips of Nicodemus was “But how do I obtain this rebirth?” Jesus, however, knew this to be so and continued in His explanation, in anticipation of the question. He told him that human birth is just that – human, earthly, and of the flesh. Every man, whether wicked or good, must experience this human birth. But, as His words imply, human birth is of this earth and is, therefore, earthly, of no spiritual good to the Lord God. But, being born of the Holy Spirit is superior and necessary. The spirit, however, it is beyond and above that of the earth, because it is of Heaven and eternity. Thus, anyone who is saved is partly in Heaven (because of His actual connection to God via the Holy Spirit) already, and partly on earth.

You might think I am going far beyond what Jesus actually said, but remember Nicodemus would have been familiar with forms of argumentation and should have understood what Jesus was saying, which was very simple. The problem is not in the explanation, but in the human being whose spirit is still dead! In such a state no man or woman can understand spiritual truths. We can tell from what Jesus said that Nicodemus was not yet regenerated (and we do not really know if he ever was), hence Jesus’ use of parable-like wording.

Evidently, even if he did not admit to it, Nicodemus was surprised by what Jesus said. For a man who was brought up on rites and traditions, it was remarkable – he expected some kind of physical activity, such as an animal sacrifice! ‘Why do you wonder at this?’ (*thaumazō*) asked Jesus.

Again, Jesus knew the man’s heart, and aimed His words well: ‘You cannot see the wind but you feel its presence and may even hear it. You do not know where it comes from or where it goes, but it still exists, even if you do not understand.’

Today, we must admit that we cannot fully understand the activities of the Holy Spirit, nor do we understand why He acts as He does, even though we are saved. Yet, we must just accept and obey, working out our salvation on this earth. We cannot understand how we can be dead in sins and then suddenly worked on by the Spirit and then receive salvation as a gift... but we must just accept and obey! This is what Jesus told Nicodemus. It is the essence of faith.

Verses 9-11

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1.

Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

2.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

3.

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

Instead of asking the obvious question, 'How, then, can this happen to me?', Nicodemus continued to be perplexed, questioning the activity itself, which he thought was impossible. Jesus expressed astonishment that a "master of Israel" did not understand what was being said. He was a teacher of Judaism and should have known these interpretations already. Instead, he was perplexed, as His Jewish upbringing clouded his mind and heart (which means he was not able to teach others adequately in the things of God). As a teacher I often come across a similar inability to understand scripture in so many Christians. Yet, they *ought* to understand.

Jesus, perhaps exasperated, told Nicodemus that what He and His disciples taught was actually witnessed by them. They were intimately familiar with their message. They bore testimony (they had seen and experienced) to what was said. Yet, Nicodemus still could not understand it. (Sometimes, a person cannot understand because he is not elect, but in others it may not yet be their time for regeneration, the timing of which is in God's hands. (The Arminian thinks it is in *his* hands, and so he spends a great deal of time saying the same thing many times, in many different ways. After all, he thinks, if he can only use the 'right' arguments, the other person is bound to respond at some time. What an error!).

Verses 12-16

1.

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

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2.

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

3.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

4.

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

5.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

If Nicodemus could not understand earthly things how could he possibly understand spiritual things of Heaven? This is the real reason why atheists and others (including ignorant Christians) cannot comprehend the truth of God. Jesus pressed His point... that no human being had ever gone up to Heaven, except for the One Who firstly came down. That is, the "Son of Man", Himself.

Some make heavy weather of this term, but it is simple enough. The 'Son of Man' can be used in the same way as the 'Son of God'. I know this because Jesus said that the Son of Man "is in Heaven". He is deity, the Lord, God. Yet, He was also a man. Hence, effectively, 'Son of Man' means 'God made man'; the Messiah.

'Son' in this text speaks of Jesus as one Who is a 'son of Abraham' through David. He came to be a man, so that He could identify with mankind. As God He did not need to do this, for He knew man better than man knew himself. But, He wanted *men* to understand that He, as Man-God, could himself understand their human state. So, He was both a son of Abraham born in the human way, AND Son of God, God Himself. Thus, 'Son of Man' is equal to 'Son of God'.

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Jesus continued: Moses lifted up the serpent of brass and people were healed by it if they were bitten by snakes (Numbers 21:9). The staff itself did not perform the miracle. Nor did the serpent. Nor did Moses. What worked the miracle was God's grace and mercy, His divine power. The staff/serpent was merely an instrument. Moses simply had to believe and do what God told him to do. It was God Who did it all. In the same way only God can save.

Similarly, Jesus prophesied that He, as Son of man, would also be lifted up, so that a mighty miracle would take place – the salvation of men. Jesus would be killed and lifted up on the cross, buried, and would arise, then to enter His own abode, Heaven. All by His own power. This was necessary so that salvation could be effected... as "That whosoever" signifies.

Then we come to the tortured verses, 15 and 16, verses that are very simple when taken as they are written. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that if he was born again, the sacrifice and resurrection of Himself would ensure salvation for all who believed, including Nicodemus. The verse clearly says that someone who believes would not enter hell, but would enter Heaven. They would be saved and know eternal life. The qualification is belief... but, it is only given to those who are predestined to election.

That this is true is found in the next verse – God so loved the world that He sacrificed Him for the elect. The elect would be saved by the death and resurrection of the Son. As in so many other texts, 'world' (*kosmos*) does not always mean the whole world. There are about eight possible meanings; one of them is 'world' as in the whole world, or even the universe. But, in this verse, it means the general collection of people known to God in salvation. That is, the aggregate of all saved persons.

This fact is borne out in several other texts. Otherwise the 'love' (*agapaō*) declared would be a lie, for God does NOT love everyone in the world equally. Therefore, God loves those who believe; these constitute 'the world' in this text, and it is for this 'world' (the elect) that the Father gave His only begotten Son. Those who believe (are saved) "should not perish, but have everlasting life". Not to accept this is to deny God's truth.

Verses 17-21

1.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him

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might be saved.

2.

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

3.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

4.

For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

5.

But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

Jesus, still speaking to Nicodemus, said that He was not sent as a man to condemn anyone, but to save "the world". Those who insist that he came for 'everyone', are actually being heretical, for they are saying, in the light of facts, that Jesus did not succeed in God's plan. It is very obvious that few are saved and most are godless. To put it another way, based on the actual text, Jesus did not come to condemn those who are elect, but to save them. The rest, the vast majority, however, *would* be condemned. This is biblical logic.

The logic of this is found in the following verses. He who believes is not condemned, but he who does not believe stands condemned already. That is, in Heaven, by eternal decree. The one who does not believe in Jesus' name is condemned. He is condemned because the Light came into the world but many sinners refused to see it. They preferred to be evil, so they rejected the Christ, the truth. And so they are condemned by their own black hearts.

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They are contrasted with those who are saved, who hate the darkness of sin and automatically move towards the Light and do what God demands. Those who reject God hate the Light and try to hide from it, always making excuses why they do such a stupid thing. They do not want to lose their sinful pleasures and so they refuse the Gospel. These are forever cast away by God. A prime example of this is in Romans where God says that homosexuals are destined for hell because they reject truth and light. God condemns them 'wholesale', and this is why only a minute number of them are saved. To put it in God's terms – they made themselves stupid and they will suffer forever as a consequence.

Verses 22-24

1.

After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized.

2.

And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.

3.

For John was not yet cast into prison.

A short while after the visit by Nicodemus, Jesus and His disciples (no number is given but they may have been a large group) walked through Judaea. They stayed a while and baptised more followers, who were probably those already baptised by John the Baptist. It is possible that Jesus baptised a few, but the construction of the verse does not clarify if this is a fact or not.

At the same time John the Baptist was baptising in Aenon ('springs') near Salim ('peace'; eight miles from Scythopolis/Beth Shean, south of the Sea of Galilee. He was there because of the plentiful water supply. This was a transition period, when both Jesus (or/and the disciples) and John were preaching and baptising. It was just before John was imprisoned and put to death.

Verses 25&26

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1.

Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying.

2.

And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.

Because of this dual activity both Jews and disciples of Jesus were curious. Was the baptism of Jesus the same as that of John – a cleansing ritual in which sins were forgiven? The Jews went to John and asked him to make things clear, as the One Who John identified at the Jordan as the Messiah was also baptising thousands, but it seemed for different purposes.

Verses 27-36

1.

John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.

2.

Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him.

3.

He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.

4.

He must increase, but I must decrease.

5.

He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the

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earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all.

6.

And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth; and no man receiveth his testimony.

7.

He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.

8.

For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.

9.

The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.

10.

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

John made a statement, that no man can do anything for God unless God firstly gives him that thing to do. In modern parlance, no Christian can perform ANY ministry unless it is given to him by God. sadly, most Christians do what they are NOT called to do; theirs is a self-imposed activity to make their consciences feel better. Many Christians spend so much time searching for what to do, they fail to stay still and wait for the Spirit to show them! it is better to do nothing than to go ahead under one's own direction and whim.

John reminded the Jews of something he had said earlier – he was not the Messiah, but was only the herald sent on before Him, to prepare the way. In itself, this was an answer – that the reason Jesus had so many flocking to Him was because His work was of God and He was the Messiah. Just as the friend of the bridegroom enjoys the fact that his friend has the bride, so

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John was overjoyed to know the Christ and prepare the way for Him. He added that now the Christ had come, he (John) is full of joy and his work was now completed. How many pastors and teachers have the courage and humility to recognise when to stand back or to retire from their task when the Holy Spirit has taken over?

John's declaration was simple and profound – as Jesus increased so he must decrease; John's time and mission would soon end. This is because John's work was on this earth, seconded to him by God, whereas the Messiah came from Heaven and so was automatically superior to him. Jesus is "above all". Not only is He God, but whatever He said was a witness of what was recorded and said in Heaven. Jesus was passing-on what Heaven wished. Yet, even John knew that men would reject what was said by Jesus (verse 32).

Those who believed affirmed the seal of God on Jesus' ministry and that "God is true". In this text the 'seal', *sphragizō*, is the mark of God: Jesus WAS and is that mark. He had the 'stamp of God' in Himself, as the miracles confirmed. He proved Himself to be that seal or mark, time and again. Jesus was and is God, so His words are from God. When He spoke and acted it was without any limits at all: He was given the Spirit in abundance, beyond anything human beings could ever know.

This is because the Father loved the Son, into Whose hands He delivered everything in Creation and in eternity. There can be no greater power and authority than that! For these reasons, those who believe in the Son have everlasting life, but those who do not believe will never see that life, but will have God's wrath poured over him, both in this world and in hell.

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