

descriptive
Bible
studies
on the
people
and
questions
in the
Gospel
of
John



What does it mean to be born again?

This important question is two questions in one: 1.) How and when is a person born again? and 2.) What changes take place in the person who is born of God?

Since this passage is the primary text on the new birth, we should be able to answer these questions as we describe Nicodemus and the Lord's teaching on regeneration. A few other relevant passages to be considered are Eze. 11:19-20, 36:25-27, John 1:12-13, and Tit. 3:5.

3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: **3:2** 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.** **3:3** 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.

3:4 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?** **3:5** 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. **3:6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **3:7** Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. **3:8** 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.

3:9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, **How can these things be?** **3:10** Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou the master of Israel, and knowest not these things? **3:11** **Verily, verily**, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. **3:12** If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? **3:13** And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. **3:14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: **3:15** That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.



This is one of the most important passages and studies in John, both evangelistically and theologically. There are more comments and diagrams in these five pages than in most other studies.

Let's describe . . .

1. Nicodemus

* It's easy to criticize Nicodemus in this passage, but before judging him as insincere like other Jewish leaders remember that he came to the Lord personally in chapter three, spoke up for him briefly in chapter seven (7:50-52), and helped to bury his body in chapter 19 (19:38-42).

* Based on what Jesus said to him, what was Nicodemus' greatest need? Why do you think he was so slow to understand this?

* Why do you think the Lord spoke to Nicodemus about the new birth rather than to someone else? Was it because of his background and knowledge of the Hebrew Bible?

2. The New Birth

* What is the relationship between believing and being born again? Is repentance (i.e. mind change) involved in any way?

* Since "the Spirit" is a key term in the passage, the new birth must have something to do with the work of the Holy Spirit. How would you include this in your description?

* Scholarly Nicodemus should have understood the new birth (3:10). Therefore it must have been "known" to some extent the O.T. Two key passages to consider are Eze. 11:19-20 and 36:25-27. How do these relate to Jesus' teaching in John three? Are these verses completely fulfilled in N.T. regeneration or do they, also, relate to Israel in the future kingdom (as seen in Rom. ch. 11)?

and make applications.

* How and to what extent should I be like or unlike Nicodemus?

* How should I respond to Jesus' message on the need and nature of the new birth?

Warning!

*The following four pages of discussion which was part of a seminar on [Theological Evangelism](#), is some of the most important and controversial interaction in this entire commentary. So **do not** expect to agree with everything that is said.*

Dr. Evans (comments on fishing & repentance)

"My initial fishing experience as a child was catching minnows in a small stream, trusting in a hand-cut alder pole, old green fishing line, a single hook, and two or three earthworms in an old tobacco can. I wasn't much of a fisherman; so a three inch minnow was a trophy catch."

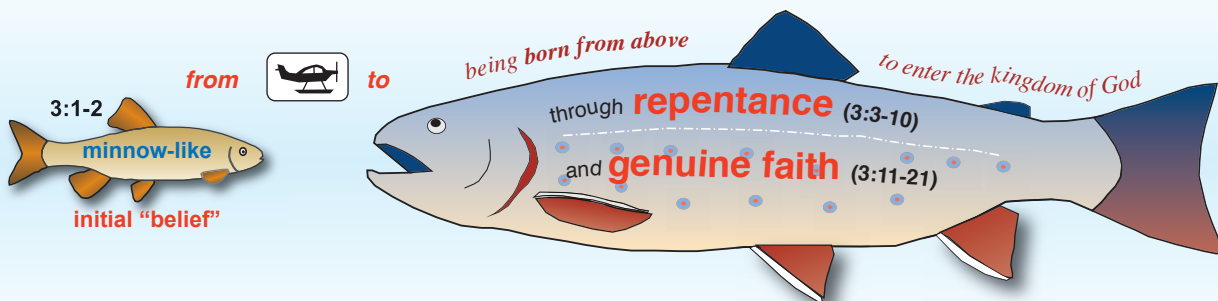
"Years later a pilot and guide flew my friends and I who trusted his special knowledge and skill to an isolated lake where the smallest lure used was larger than the minnows of my childhood. There I caught a seven pound brook trout. I caught the fish, but without that pilot's special "from-above" enabling we never could have entered such a fishermen's paradise."

"Likewise, Nicodemus came with his minnow-like initial "belief" in 3:1-2, but the Lord challenged him to change his mind about how to enter God's kingdom in 3:3-10 and then taught him and others the essence of genuine biblical faith. He needed to repent of his initial, works oriented view of what the Jewish religion was all about, in order to see and enter God's kingdom. In some ways he was **like many others today**." →

"As a **sincere** seeker, Nicodemus are **willing and enabled to change his mind**. Though he was a **famous Bible teacher** (3:10), he was **off on some key points**. That's why the Lord's words to him in 3:3 and 3:5-10 were so shocking, designed to cause him to repent of some initial errors. He was **not all wrong**, of course, for he correctly believed that Jesus was "come from God" (3:2), but he probably, also, believed that he could earn entrance into the kingdom of God by keeping the Sabbath and other biblical commands. So rather than answering his opening statement, Jesus' words were in answer to a question that Nicodemus didn't ask. How can a **sinful adult** ever enter the kingdom of God?"

"Though Nicodemus' was **focused on what he couldn't do** (being **unable to start over**), the Lord's much more positive emphasis was on what God could do, making this a key passage on **God's enabling**. In fact, 3:5-8 is the first detailed reference to the work of the Holy Spirit in John, elaborating upon what was stated briefly earlier about the new birth in 1:13."

Was Nicodemus "the big one that didn't get away" or like a mere "minnow" who never really believed?



From our limited human perspective it depends on how Nicodemus responded to Jesus' teaching on the new birth.

Alethia (comments on taking the truth seriously)

"I believe Nicodemus took what Jesus said about his **personal need for spiritual birth from above** very seriously because of the Lord's emphatic "truly, truly" in 3:3, 3:5, and 3:11. Often statements that begin with the double "amen" are calls for repentance [i.e. mind change] and genuine or greater faith. Check out 1:51, 5:19, 6:26, 8:34, and 13:38, for some other examples of this. Nicodemus was probably **shocked** by these statements, but they were, also, just what he needed."

Rocky (comments on Nicodemus' condition)

"Look! The point of the Lord's message was that Nicodemus was **spiritually dead**. Thus, he was like a boxer who is "out cold" on the canvas, totally unable to defend himself or even wake up. The trainer has to shock the KO'd guy out of it somehow, with smelling salts, a bucket of cold water, or whatever, to bring him back to his senses. That's what, I believe, the Lord did for Nicodemus. From 7:50-52 and 19:39 it looks to me like he was successful."

Cal (*comments on the divine origin of spiritual life*)

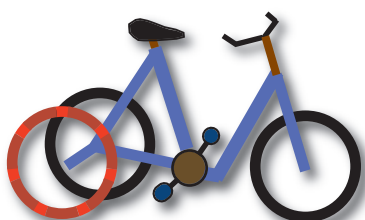
"The Lord never fails. So I, too, believe that Nicodemus was **saved later** as a result of this foreordained encounter and **the work of the Holy Spirit** in his heart, which, of course, is what the new birth is all about. As others have said, he was **totally unable to save himself**. A miracle **from above** was needed; and that's exactly what the new birth is."

"That's, also, why I wish that Dr. Evans had said that Nicodemus was **enabled to change his mind** and as a result was made willing to believe, rather than that he was "willing and enabled." To me the order of these two verbs is important. We Calvinists believe that God must enable before any individual, scoundrel or scholar, will ever be willing to receive the Lord Jesus (1:12-13)."

Dr. Theophilus (*comments on spiritual change*)

"There's no doubt about the **miraculous** nature of the new birth and the **necessary** role of the Holy Spirit therein (3:5-8). However, John 1:12-13 and 3:15 show that the new birth takes place at the moment one believes rather than prior to it. We'll talk more later about whether there is a logical priority or not." [See the next page and the answer to Cal's question #4 in Special Quest 12.6.]

"Also, let's be more clear on the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and the new birth. John 16:8-11, Acts 7:51, and Heb. 6:4-6 indicate that conviction doesn't always result in salvation. So the new birth should not be equated with all aspects of the Spirit's work to bring one to Christ. It must be something more specific. I believe that is **the miraculous life-giving change that takes place at the exact moment of salvation** which makes the born-again person a child of God (1:12), with eternal life (3:15) and access to God's kingdom (3:5)."



"Visually, regeneration is **like the restoration of the third (spiritual) wheel of an adult tricycle**, whose third wheel was previously missing. Man can function somewhat as a two-wheeler, as body and soul only, but that is not as God originally intended (1 Thes. 5:23). Thus, the new birth brings **a new, third dimension to our lives** (2 Cor. 5:17), like restoring the third wheel."

Evan (*comments on using John three in evangelism*)

"I suppose it's good to think about **the wonderful life we have in the Spirit** because of the new birth, but isn't John 3:1-15 primarily evangelistic? It's theological evangelism perhaps, but evangelism nonetheless. So shouldn't we discuss how to use this passage to reach the lost, instead of focusing on the nature of man as body, soul, and spirit?"

"If I were going to use the tricycle illustration, I'd re-draw it as a total wreck: rusted, bent, scratched, with two flat tires, broken spokes, and twisted handlebars, and above all **missing the third spiritual wheel**. I'd, also, depict Nicodemus as **an old man** applying **legalistic** wax to his wrecked and sinful life, but unable to restore it, because he didn't know how to start over."

Paul (*comments on Jesus as the real restoration Expert*)

"If I were using the wrecked tricycle illustration, I'd describe Nicodemus as **an expert on the law like the Apostle Paul** who could understand the various dings and dents of his **less than perfect** life, but was still incapable of restoring it, despite his great knowledge. Outwardly, his life looked a bit better than that of many others, but he was still imperfect (Rom 3:23) and his biblical knowledge condemned him rather saved him."

"A related illustration that I like to use is from a TV reality show in which damaged antiques are restored to their original perfection. Rust is sandblasted away and missing parts are recreated. It takes a special expert to do all this and the owner of each item must trust the expert, just like Nicodemus needed to trust the Lord instead of himself. My favorite verse to use with this is Titus 3:5 which talks about "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" performed by the Lord, the only real Expert, rather than by ourselves. Our works of righteousness are **totally inadequate**."

Sketch (*comments on illustrating spiritual death*)

"Like Nicodemus, extra-biblical illustrations are **far from perfect**. So if we compare the new birth to a makeover project some may mistakenly think, like Adam, that all will be well if they simply paint over their visible flaws. Regeneration is a lot more than that, for Nicodemus was **spiritually dead, not just damaged**."

"Likewise, the tricycle illustration is controversial because some believe that man has two parts (the material body and the immaterial soul-spirit) instead of three (body, soul, and spirit). I wonder how these folks would picture the unregenerate man. Perhaps they'd draw a bicycle with a partly ruined rear wheel, but that wouldn't illustrate man's spiritual deadness nearly as well."

Dr. Theophilus (comments on recreation in Christ)

"It's popular to speak of spiritual death as separation from God, but that doesn't include the fact that something in Adam really died when he sinned, because of which we each need to be recreated in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). If spiritual death is equal to separation from God, our only resultant spiritual need would be reconciliation. Spiritual death results in separation from God, but is not exactly equal to it. So we must, also, be born again!"

"Did Nicodemus need to be reconciled to God? Yes, of course. However, he probably thought that the sacrifices offered by a **practicing Jew** like himself was adequate for that purpose. According to Heb. 10:4 and many other verses, it was not. Rather than directly correcting his erroneous view of sacrifices, as is done in the book of Hebrews, however, Jesus spoke of his need for something far more **heavenly**, rebirth **from above**, which would change him from within, **in line with Ezekiel 11:19-20 and 36:25-26.**"

"My favorite passage to show the relationship between the new birth and reconciliation is 2 Cor. 5:17-21, in which our recreation in Christ is mentioned in 5:17 before our reconciliation in 5:18-19. Regeneration and reconciliation are, thus, closely related, but regeneration logically comes first. There is nothing in this text on the logic order of regeneration and faith, however."

Cal (comments on logical doctrinal order in salvation)

"OK! Dr. Theophilus finally said something about the logical order of various aspects of salvation. You can't really discuss the doctrine of salvation [soteriology] without mentioning logical order." [Erickson's *Christian Theology* discusses this on pp. 944-45 (2nd. ed.). Also see Cal's question #4 in *Special Quest 12.6.*]

"By the way, 2 Cor 5:17-21, also, emphasizes that our salvation is **all of God**; regeneration (5:17), reconciliation (5:18-20), and justification (5:21)."

Wes (comments on human responsibility)

"Wait a minute! There's a lot in 2 Cor. 5:17-21 about our *part* in the ministry of reconciliation, as ambassadors for Christ. Sure, regeneration and reconciliation are **ultimately all of God**, but we are responsible to speak and those that hear us are responsible, as well. We see that here in John three, too. For instance, wasn't Jesus holding the Jewish rulers responsible for their collective unbelief when he said, "You [plural] do not receive our witness." (3:11)? Notice, also, that he didn't say that you must be born again in order to believe; rather, he simply said you must be born again."

Tim (comments on regeneration as eschatology)

"Look, what the Lord really said to Nicodemus was **eschatological**, that he must be born again in order to enter God's future kingdom. So let's stop wasting time debating whether the new birth makes faith possible or if it's the other way around. Sure, there is a close relationship between the two, but in his actual statements (3:3 and 3:5) Jesus connected the new birth with his kingdom, a fact that nobody has even mentioned."

"The kingdom of God has to do with God's rule and, in this context, is primarily concerned with the future literal reign of the Messiah as King of kings (Rev. 19:16). Since the Hebrew Bible is full of prophecy about this, including in the two Ezekiel passages that Dr. Theophilus mentioned, a teacher like Nicodemus would naturally be very **interested in the kingdom of God**. So I believe there is a close connection between his reference to Jesus being "from God" in 3:2 and the Lord's teaching on "the kingdom of God" in 3:3 and 3:5."

"Sadly most evangelicals are so focused on how to get to heaven that the real focus and importance of this **profoundly eschatological** passage is totally overlooked. Nicodemus, however, was **impacted greatly** by the Lord's powerful message on how to enter God's kingdom, even though he apparently was unable to understand it at first. This is not just about heaven!"

Dr. Ed (comments on evangelizing the well-educated)

"Paradoxically and humanly speaking, Nicodemus apparently came to believe because of what he understood *and* because of what he didn't understand. Though it's easy to criticize him for being a **teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures** and yet **ignorant of the new birth as prophesied by Ezekiel and others**, the Lord's challenge concerning his ignorance of the subject was just what he needed. His actions in chs. seven and nineteen show that the **difficult to understand** message on regeneration somehow got through to him."

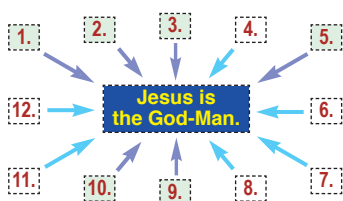
"This leads me to a couple conclusions about how to evangelize **thoughtful** people like Nicodemus. First, we must not expect every such individual to receive the Lord immediately. Normally, like Saul of Tarsus and probably Nicodemus, some will come to Christ *after* their evangelistic encounter. Second, in evangelism of the **well-educated** there is no substitute for the simple presentation of the cross (3:14-16, 1 Cor. 2:1-5); but that may not be the only truth that is necessary. Here and in 10:34-38 Jesus challenged his audience with what appear to be partly extraneous points, if the cross were the only thing that needed to be presented."

Dr. Evans (comments on multi-aspect evangelism)

“Some evangelists would be upset about what Dr. Ed just said concerning the need to overcome erroneous presuppositions before people will think seriously about the cross and the gospel. Dr. Ed and I agree on this, however, even though this may be unusual for teacher types like him and evangelists like me. The reason is that we both appreciate the various aspects of evangelism and evangelistic teaching on display in the Gospel of John. These include:

1. Jesus' miracles (2:11, 3:2, 5:36, 6:10-14, 11:45),
2. overcoming doubts & errors (1:44-51, 3:1-9, 20:11-29),
3. O.T. association (1:51, 3:14, 6:35, 8:58, 12:38-41),
4. the witness of John the Baptist (1:6-8, 5:31-35, 10:40-42),
5. special knowledge of individuals (1:48-50, 4:29),
6. personal humility despite divinity (5:19-30, Phil. ch. 2),
7. combining grace and truth (1:16-18, 3:15-16, 8:1-11),
8. exposing the Lord's foes (8:7-9, 9:24-34, 12:10-11),
9. bold and skillful persuasion (7:21-24, 10:34-34-38),
10. special knowledge of Scripture (3:3-10, 7:14-15),
11. Jesus' bodily resurrection (2:19-22, 20:1-21:25), and
12. the Gospel of John, itself (20:30-31, 21:24-25).”

“Several of these aspects are seen in this passage, including: Jesus' miracles (3:2), overcoming error (3:3-10), close O.T. association (3:14), bold and skillful persuasion (3:3-15), special knowledge of Nicodemus (3:3, 10), and special knowledge of Scripture (3:3-15).”



“When various kinds of data all point to the same conclusion, we can be quite sure that it is correct.”

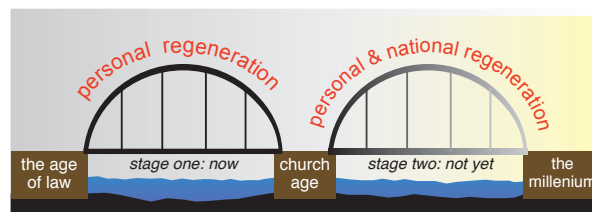
Dr. Johnson (comments on Nicodemus as exception)

“Nicodemus was an **exceptional individual** who overcame his **group-conscious** fears. (His coming at night is mentioned three times, in 3:2, 7:50, and 19:39.) Like Tim, I suspect his interest in the rule of God played a key role in this. Whereas verses like 11:47-48 show that other rulers were focused on their own authority, Nicodemus' opening line and the Lord's answer show that he was **unusual, interested in God's power and authority**. This and 1 Cor. 1:26-31 show that born-again nobles are few and far between.”

“The unnamed nobleman in 4:46-54 and Joseph of Arimathea (19:38) are the only other saved noblemen mentioned in John. This, along with the fact that Nicodemus appears three times, makes him an **exceptional and important character in John's Gospel**, as a specific saved ruler, much like Zacchaeus is as a saved rich man in Luke. Praise God for the exceptions!”

Dr. Quest (comments on the new birth as a bridge)

“I asked Tim and Sketch how they would represent the new birth. This is their depiction of it as a **double arch bridge**. The first arch represents the new birth as experienced by each believer during the church age and the second represents the regeneration that will be experienced collectively by the saved Jewish remnant that lives through the tribulation period and entering the millenium in line with Ezekiel 11:19-20 and 36:25-26.”



“As in 3:5 and Ezekiel, the water under the bridge represents spiritual cleansing, not water baptism.”

the people Jesus & Nicodemus	the principles (general principles)	to the point my personal applications
Though a famous teacher, Nicodemus , needed to change his mind and be born again through faith.	We should be open to biblical truth even if it at first seems shocking and unreasonable.	
Jesus confronted Nicodemus' need to repent (3:3-10) and then presented the gospel (3:11-15).	We should be open to the gospel rather than satisfied with our initial traditional beliefs.	