

Reflections on John 3.1-21

by Will Groben

Day 1 / Memorize: Time to memorize another verse! Do you still remember the others? One idea is to keep them in your car to review at red lights. Keeps you calmer and uses the time efficiently! This week, memorize John 3.16!

Learn: Prayerfully read John 3.1-21. Nicodemus was a Pharisee in the religious ruling council, the Sanhedrin. In the Greek text, this passage is grammatically connected to the previous section, 2.23-25, so Nicodemus exemplified those who in some sense believed in Jesus because of his miracles, but with a faith that was inadequate. Later, Nicodemus apparently came to full faith [he reappears in the story at John 7.45-52; 19.38-42]. Nicodemus – perhaps representing some like-minded leaders, since he said “we” – struck a friendly tone with Jesus, calling him “Rabbi” or “Teacher.” This was much nicer than other Pharisees were about Jesus [see John 7.48; 8.48]. However, it was not recognition enough: he did not call Jesus “Messiah” or even a prophet, just a teacher obviously blessed by God.

Reflect: It is easy to recognize Jesus as a wise teacher, a man of ethics, even as a prophetic voice for his time, but do you recognize him as the unique Savior providing the only way to reconciliation with God? Read John 14.6 and reflect on it.

Want more? Why did John note in v.2 that Nicodemus came at night? There are a few theories: Nicodemus wanted a longer conversation with Jesus than was possible during the daytime when the crowds thronged around Jesus; he wanted to approach Jesus in secret, knowing the other religious leaders were against Jesus already; or he had been studying and debating well into the evening, as rabbis frequently did. Perhaps a clue can be found in the way John uses “night” throughout the gospel: every mention of night is either a metaphor for spiritual darkness or, if it is actual nighttime, it is still symbolic of spiritual darkness associated with the story. Nicodemus came at night for whatever reason, but he was about to find out that his own “night” was darker than he knew. Read Psalm 139.23-24: if God searches your heart, will he find any spiritual darkness hiding in there? Are there sins you are repeating or of which you refuse to repent?

Day 2 / Memorize: Practice John 3.16! In times of need, the Holy Spirit can bring memorized scripture into your mind!

Learn: Read John 3.1-21 again. Nicodemus did not really ask Jesus a question, but there was kind of an implied question that Jesus answered. Nicodemus was trying to assess who Jesus really was, he came to Jesus assuming he had the right to assess Jesus by his own standards, just as had those leaders in the temple who demanded a sign to prove Jesus’ authority. In return, Jesus essentially questioned Nicodemus’ qualifications to assess anything of God. Jesus also confused Nicodemus, but let’s be sure we understand his words. By “kingdom of God” Jesus referred to the prophesied kingdom at the end of time which would be presided over by the ultimate Davidic King, the Messiah [e.g. Isaiah 9.6-7; Zechariah 9.9-10]. To Nicodemus, this would have meant personal resurrection from the dead and eternal life. A lot of people do not realize that the term “born again” is actually in the Bible [some translations have “born from above”].

Reflect: Jesus said we have to be born again to have this eternal life, and how did he say this happens? See vv.15-16. Note from v.18 that this eternal life begins now, as soon as you truly believe in who Jesus is and what he accomplished for you on the cross! You are not born again when you die a physical death, you are born again from your spiritual death the moment you accept that Jesus was God the Son and the promised Messiah deliverer, that he paid the penalty for all your sins and made it possible to reconcile with God when he died on the cross, and he rose again from the grave. When you accept those things in faith, you spiritually enter into the kingdom of God, and you will be resurrected from the physically dead to live in the eternal kingdom when Christ returns. If you have already been born again, do you live like it? Deeper questions: if you are born again, how should your perspective be changed with regard to enduring suffering? with regard to choosing God’s way instead of your human impulse? with regard to the use of your time, money, talents, and energy?

Want more? Nicodemus was a bit flustered by what Jesus was telling him. It was not just the term “born again” that threw him. As a religious leader, Nicodemus probably believed the prevailing theory that all Jews apart from those who had abandoned the faith would be admitted to the kingdom of God, because they were descendents of Abraham. Plus, he would have been confident of his righteousness through obedience as a Pharisee. Now he heard that he could not enter the kingdom unless he was born again. The term for “born again” can also mean “born from above” and we see in this passage that to be born again is to be born of the Holy Spirit, who came from Heaven. It is a regeneration of the individual who will enter into the regeneration of the world at the end of time [look at 1 Peter 1.3-5]. It is not about who you are, where you come from, how well you do, it is about being transformed and made alive by the Holy Spirit! Pray about this and praise and thank God for his grace and mercy!

Day 3 / Memorize: Practice the memory verse! Memorized scripture can be a great encouragement!

Learn: Read John 3.1-12. Nicodemus did not understand Jesus, but worse he did not believe him. Think about the difference for a moment. Are there not things from the Bible that you find confusing or hard to grasp yet you believe? Are there not other things that you find difficult to believe? In such situations, what does God call on you to do, understand or believe? Sure we should seek to understand, but when we cannot we must still believe and trust God will reveal what we need to know at the right time. Nicodemus was not willing to believe what he could not understand from his own studies: at this point in the story, he lacked faith in Jesus.

Reflect: In v.8, Jesus seems to be saying that those who are of the world will not understand those who are born again by the Holy Spirit, but they will be able to see the change in those who are born again. If you are a believer, whereas you once behaved like those in the world, can the world now see the change in the way you treat people? the way you talk? the way you make decisions? the way you spend your money and time? Pray about these things.

Want more? There are a lot of theories about what Jesus meant when he said we had to be born of water and the Spirit. One is that the water refers to our natural birth, but in Greek the phrase looks to refer to our rebirth only, not both. Another is that the water refers to either our Christian baptism or John's baptism of repentance, but if this were so then water should be mentioned again in this discussion, yet it is not. The most convincing theory is that the whole phrase "water and Spirit" refers to the process of being born again from above: in the Old Testament many of the prophets spoke of a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on people, cleansing and renewing them. This theory would also lead us to conclude that the process involved an impartation of God's nature. Read Ezekiel 36.25-27, which Nicodemus should have known, and thus not been surprised by Jesus' words. What Jesus was saying had been prophesied in the Old Testament.

Day 4 / Memorize: Practice the memory verse! Memorized scripture can be an awe-inspiring teaching tool!

Learn: Read John 3.9-15. Jesus did answer Nicodemus' question about how this could be: one can be reborn into eternal life and the kingdom of God by having faith in the saving work of Christ. In v.14, the serpent reference is from Numbers 21.4-9. God gave a gift of new physical life to those who were dying of snake bite [as a result of their sins], if they looked in faith at the pole Moses held aloft. Now Jesus said that God was giving the gift of new spiritual life [and eventually resurrected physical life] to those who were dead as a result of their sins, if they looked in faith at him. The Greek phrase "lifted up" in this book always combines both Jesus' crucifixion on the cross and his exaltation, following Isaiah's themes in Isaiah 52.13-53.12. You should read and be inspired by this passage, for Isaiah wrote this hundreds of years before Jesus was born! Nicodemus would make sense of this when he saw Jesus on the cross. Take some time to praise God!

Want more? Verse 13 is hard to understand in a word-for-word translation. Most likely, Jesus was saying, that nobody had ascended into Heaven and returned to be able to speak authoritatively about heavenly things, but he had descended from Heaven and therefore was able to speak of such things. He descended from Heaven, an indication of his identity!

Day 5 / Memorize: Practice the memory verse! Jews in Jesus' day memorized much of the Old Testament!

Learn: Read John 3.16-21. The world already stood condemned for its sin, but God the Father graciously sent the Son as an offer of grace. Those who do not believe remain condemned, but those who believe in him are not condemned. What does Jesus say about why some do not come to the light? Notice that those who do come to the light – those who live by the truth in faith – delight in exposing the fact that all their goodness is the result of the work of God.

Reflect: Are you running to the light or skulking in the half-gray shadows? Are you conscious that what is good in you is by grace, not of your own merit? that you have no righteousness before God except that which Christ gives to you? Are you turning to the lifted up Son of Man in simple, desperate, unqualified faith?

Want more? The original Greek manuscripts have no punctuation, so it is hard to tell when a quoted speech ends and commentary from the author begins. Most translations treat verses 16-21 as part of Jesus' speech, but many modern commentators believe these verses are the commentary of John about Jesus' speech [mostly because the words used are more common for John than Jesus]. It does not really matter: all the words of the Bible are inspired from God anyway!