

Believe

JOHN

[MESSAGE](#)[STUDY GUIDE](#)[GROUP MATERIAL](#)[SONGS](#)

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: John 2:23-3:10

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²³ Now while Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Feast of the Passover, many people believed in his name because they saw the miraculous signs he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need anyone to testify about man, for he knew what was in man.

³ Now a certain man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, ² 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 could perform the miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus replied, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must all be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus replied, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things? (John 2:23-3:10)

I. Nicodemus

A. A Historical figure

- “Richard Bauckham argues that John’s account of Nicodemus is reliable. The Nicodemus of John 3 was a member of the wealthy Gurion family known from rabbinic texts.” [Richard Bauckham, “*Historiographic Characteristics of... John*,” J. H. Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, p. 150]
- “Bauckham prefers the possibility that the [Nicodemus] of Jesus’ day was the uncle of the Nicodemus mentioned by [the Jewish historian] Josephus, & the brother of a Gurion. Whatever the relationship among the Nicodemuses [mentioned] in Josephus, Naqdimon ben Gorion & the Fourth Gospel [of John] they apparently belong to the same family prominent in the first-century Judean leadership. *A member of this lineage probably stands behind the character of Nicodemus in the 4th Gospel.*” [Harold W. Attridge, “*Pharisees in the 4th Gospel & One Special Pharisee*,” in J. Sievers (ed.) *Pharisees*, 193]

B. A Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel, elite – 3:1, 10

C. An example of those to whom Jesus does not entrust himself (2:23-25)

1. Continues the thought about man/people

2. A ‘man,’ Nicodemus is a specific example, not a contrast to those in 2:23-25.

3. Comes to Jesus because of the signs.

- “Nicodemus...is usually seen as a man who is genuinely interested in Jesus, but failed to understand him, & only later came to *something like faith* in him...The ‘type of man’ that Nicodemus represents is identical to Jn. 2:23-25, where Jesus does not trust himself to certain people in Jerusalem who had believed in him when they saw the signs that he did because ‘he knew what was in man.’ Thus Nicodemus is portrayed as *one of the untrustworthy believers*... Nicodemus’ other two appearances reveal a similar ‘type’...In 7:45-52 Nicodemus defends Jesus in a way that is hardly satisfactory...And again in 19:38-42 his actions are *less than satisfactory and should be viewed as unbelief*. Throughout the Gospel...Nicodemus appears as *a man of inadequate faith & inadequate courage*, & as such he represents a group...*secret Christian Jews or ‘crypto-Christians’*.” [Edward W. Klink, *Sheep of the Fold: Audience & Origin of the Gospel*, 192]
- “Nicodemus’ introduction [3:1 is] as (1.) a person ([‘human’] *anthropos*), who is (2.) from the Pharisees, & (3.) a leader of the Jews is inextricably linked to the previous scene [2:23-25] and the ‘many’ to whom Jesus would not entrust himself.” [Michael R. Whittington, *Configuring Nicodemus*, 88]
- “Immediately preceding our text [3:1-21] is a narrator’s comment about the inadequate faith of the people who saw Jesus’ signs [2:23-25]. The link...is the double repetition of ‘man’ [*anthropos*] in 2:25 and the ensuing reference to ‘man’ in 3:1. Clearly John desired his readers to see the connection between Nicodemus & the multitudes whose faith was based on signs.” [Bryan Born, “*Literary Features...in John 3:1-21*,” *Direction*, Vol. 17, #2 (1998) p.]
- “Nicodemus is a person for whom the acknowledgment of Jesus’ signs is the end as well as the beginning of his acknowledgment of Jesus.” [R. F. Collins, 1995 p. 363; 2013 p. 94]

D. Coming to Jesus at night – 3:2

1. Night in the gospel of John relates to darkness

2. Darkness (night) is contrasted with light

3. Those who follow Jesus do not walk in the darkness (8:12)

4. Speaking flattering words to Jesus

- “Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (3:2), a not incidental feature of the story which the evangelist echoes in 19:39 [‘Nicodemus (who had previously come to him at night)...’ (19:39)] Nicodemus is a nocturnal character...In the 4th Gospel night is not a good time. Productive things don’t happen at night...The nocturnal characterization...associates him with those who walk in darkness. The light is not in him.” [Raymond F. Collins, “*Who Are You?*” in CW. Skinner (ed.) *Characters & Characterization in...John*, p. 91]
- “Nicodemus’ nocturnal visit...has often been taken symbolically to mean that *Nicodemus ‘does not walk in the light’ and ‘is not, then, a believer’* (J. Neyrey).” [Raimo Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity*, 132-3]
- “Nicodemus has ‘come’ to Jesus (3:2), which someone who hates the light will not do, & during the conversation his incomprehension was relentlessly ‘exposed’. At the same time *it cannot be said that he is fully enlightened or gives evidence of doing ‘what is true.’* Whether he will do so is a question...carried forward in the narrative.” [Craig Koester, “*Theological Complexity &...Nicodemus,*” CW. Skinner (ed.) *Character...in...John*, p. 175]

E. Not understanding and not believing what Jesus is talking about – 3:4, 9-10

- 4... “How can a man be born when he is old?...⁹ Nicodemus replied, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel & yet you don’t understand these things? (3:9-10 NET)

1. Not understanding the deeper meaning – born from above – 3:3

- The Greek word *an?then* means both “from above” and “again” or “anew”. This double meaning is possible only in Greek...Jesus’ expression “to be born *an?then*, to be born from above/again” challenges Nicodemus to move beyond surface meanings to a deeper meaning. Gail O’Day, *John*, 468
- “For Jesus to assert spiritual rebirth as a precondition [for seeing God’s kingdom] must have startled his rabbinic counterpart [Nicodemus]. *But should it have?...*The sharpness of Jesus’ rebuke (3:10) suggests *that Nicodemus could legitimately be expected to understand* his...need for regeneration. But where in the Hebrew Scriptures is this taught? Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones raised to life (Ezek. 37) may still refer to Israel’s collective experience...But [Ezek. 36] includes a remarkable passage [that] seems to anticipate Jesus’ teaching in John 3: ‘I’ll take you from the nations & gather you from all the countries...²⁵ I will also *sprinkle clean water on you*, & you will be clean. I will *cleanse you* from all your impurities & all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart & *put a new spirit within you*; I’ll remove your heart of stone & give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will *place my Spirit within you* & cause you to follow my statutes & carefully observe my ordinances.’ (Ezek. 36:24-27) [Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John*,]
- “In [his] initial encounter with Jesus...although Nicodemus came to Jesus, he *had not fully understood or fully ‘believed.’* Jesus initially tells him that he must be ‘born again’ (3:3); a concept that Nicodemus does not even understand (3:4, 9). Jesus rebukes Nicodemus... for not understanding these things (3:10) & *accuses him of not accepting his testimony (3:11) or ‘believing’ (3:12)...*Against this background 3:14-16 functions as a warning, as much as a promise’ (Motyer).” [Edward W. Klink, *Sheep of the Fold*, 218]

- “Nicodemus incredulously asks, “How can these things be?” (3:9), whereupon Jesus responds, “Are you the teacher of Israel & yet you don’t understand these things?” (3:10). This response...*presupposes that Nicodemus could understand* [Jesus] & at the same time *condemns* [Nicodemus,] a ‘teacher of Israel’ *for not understanding* ...In the case of the latter...Jesus’ implicit condemnation is related to the social antagonism between [the ‘we’] and [‘you people’ (3:11)]...This is confirmed by Jesus’ next words: ‘I tell you the solemn truth, we speak about what we know & testify about what we have seen, but *you people do not accept our testimony*’ (3:11) to which we must add...‘*you do not believe*’ (3:12)...*Nicodemus’ ‘not believing’ and ‘not receiving’ employs the [same] verbs used in 1:9-12 in connection with the failure of [‘his] own people’ to ‘receive’ or ‘believe’ him [1:11].*” [Norman R. Petersen, *John & the Sociology of Light*, 43]

2. Jesus repeats himself – born of water and the Spirit – 3:5

3. Nicodemus, a teacher, should have understood water and Spirit

- Ezek. 36: 25-27 ²⁵ I will sprinkle you with pure water, and you will be clean from all your impurities. I will purify you from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone^[b] from your body and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put my Spirit within you; ...
- “The...passage from Ezekiel [36:24-27] provides a...plausible backdrop [to ‘born of water & the spirit’]. The passage mentions ‘a new spirit’ & ‘a new heart’ that God will give believers, express[ed] also as ‘cleansing from all impurities’ by ‘sprinkling with clean water.’ It appears therefore that to ‘be born of water & spirit’ refers to a single event... spiritual rebirth (cf. Titus 3:5).” [Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John*,]

4. Rebuked by Jesus

a. A teacher doesn’t understand

b. He doesn’t receive

- “In [his] initial encounter with Jesus...although Nicodemus came to Jesus, he *had not fully understood or fully ‘believed.’* Jesus initially tells him that he must be ‘born again’ (3:3); a concept that Nicodemus does not even understand (3:4, 9). Jesus rebukes Nicodemus...for not understanding these things (3:10) & accuses him of *not accepting his testimony* (3:11) or ‘believing’ (3:12)...*Against this background 3:14-16 functions as a warning, as much as a promise’* (Motyer).” [Edward W. Klink, *Sheep of the Fold*, 218]

5. Jesus has the last word

F. A representative of the Pharisees – 3:11-12

¹¹ I tell you the solemn truth, **we** speak about what **we** know & testify about what **we** have seen, but *you people* do not accept **our** testimony. ¹² If I have told *you people* about earthly things & *you [people]* don’t believe, how will *you [people]* believe if I tell *you [people]* about heavenly things?” (3:11-12 NET)

1. Jesus has a combative verbal contest—“an acute power struggle”—with Nicodemus including all the Pharisees

- “Noting the different positions of the two [men] in Jewish society can...help us interpret their conversation. *Nicodemus & Jesus are here engaged in...an acute power struggle.* Like it or not, the two men found themselves on *two opposite ends of the spectrum of formal, didactic [teaching] authority* within Judaism. Regarding Jesus, people asked in amazement ‘How did this man get such learning without having been taught?’ (7:15)... [Jesus] was considered self-taught & without formal authority...Nicodemus, on the other hand, was a powerful member of the Jewish ruling council...the Sanhedrin... *The relationship between Jesus & the Jewish leadership* of his day was essentially a *struggle for control* over [the hearts & minds of] *the masses.* What *may look rather innocent & pale* on the written page was probably *much more charged & poignant* when it actually happened.” [Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John,*]

2. Jesus challenges the Pharisees

- a. They don't understand earthly things
- b. How can they understand heavenly things

3. Jesus has the last word.

- There's a “single & definitive reason for *Jesus' surprisingly harsh & uncompromising censure* of Nicodemus in John 3. According to Jesus' rebuke, Nicodemus is not going halfway from initial & insufficient faith towards the confession of his faith; *Jesus categorically denies any positive faith on the part of Nicodemus & makes him & his group [Pharisees, etc.] the complete opposite to Jesus & his followers...*The key to understanding Jesus' rude response is...[that] *Jesus does not confront Nicodemus here as an individual...* Rather, Jesus takes [Nicodemus] as a...*representative of groups—Pharisees & 'Jews'—[i.e.,] Jesus' opponents* throughout the Gospel...*It is the groups to which Nicodemus belongs* that dictates Jesus' response to him.” [Raimo Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity,* 139]
- Jesus tells Nicodemus & Co.: “If I have told you [pl.] about earthly things & you [pl.] don't believe, how will you [pl.] believe if I tell you [pl.] about heavenly things?” (3:12) “The contrast between those who should know something of heavenly things [i.e., Nicodemus & Co.] but are yet unable to properly understand life on earth was *a common put-down in antiquity.*” [Raimo Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity,* 134]
- Nicodemus “at best *represents Jews who,* while not disciples, *are sympathetic to Jesus...* [Nicodemus] struggles with his response to Jesus but never professes Jesus publicly.” [R. Alan Culpepper 2013 p. 34]
- “*The bar is set high* by Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus & Jesus' declaration of the requirement of a new birth from above, Nicodemus seems to be moving toward Jesus with each appearance... The reader has good reason to be hopeful about Nicodemus as much of the history of interpretation attests. On the other hand, *Nicodemus never ceases to be 'one of them' [Jewish authorities/Pharisees] (7:50)...* *John leaves his status unresolved, ambiguous.* Nicodemus remains...identified with the complexity of becoming [a]...‘child... of God, for whom *both belief in his name & birth from above are required.*” [R. Alan Culpepper, *Designs...in... John,* 251]

G. An Ambiguous Person

- *Nicodemus is an enigmatic literary character who is wavering in no man's land in John's narrative between Jesus' opponents & his true disciples.* Some scholars have taken Nicodemus as an example of someone of inadequate faith who remains an outsider throughout the

narrative, while others have traced his development from initial and tentative faith to open and public commitment to Jesus. The present article, however, agrees with those who have acknowledged that no single trait determines Nicodemus's portrait, but, *in the end, this portrait remains ambiguous.*" [Raimo Hakola, "*Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus...*," NTS 55 (2009) Abstract]

1. At the end of this dialogue, no indication that Nicodemus believes

2. Was he a "pretender/dissembler"?

- In 3:1-2 "Nicodemus lavishly praises Jesus, although considering his affiliation with 'the Jews,' some listeners will likely believe Nicodemus opposes [Jesus] when in different company. Once the conversation begins, Nicodemus claims unbelief at every turn [& appears to be] flattering Jesus for his profound teaching...in the light of his own feigned ignorance...Nicodemus may have been construed as a dissembler [i.e., a person who hides their real feelings or intentions, often by pretending to have different ones] by ancient listeners whether or not that author intended such a connection." [Michael R. Whinton, *Configuring Nicodemus*, 94]

3. Appearing two more times in John's gospel

a. Defending Jesus – kind of – 7:50-51

⁵⁰ Nicodemus...said, ⁵¹ "Our law doesn't condemn a man unless it first hears from him & learns what he is doing, does it?"

- "Nicodemus re-emerges...[in] Jn. 7 where he responds to the Pharisees who condemn those in the crowd who believed in Jesus...[Nicodemus'] appearance...carries *some level of implication that he believes* in Jesus, even if his response to the Pharisees stops short of a confession...The Pharisees' derogatory response '...You are not also from Galilee, are you?' (7:52) is tantamount to an accusation that Nicodemus too is one of Jesus' disciples. The implication is there, but again *John leaves Nicodemus' status unresolved.*" [R. Alan Culpepper, *Designs... in...John*, pp 249-50].

b. Helping to bury Jesus – 19:38-39

i. Appears after Joseph of Arimathea a disciple of Jesus

ii. Doesn't say Nicodemus is a disciple

- "There is some degree of ambiguity in the action since one can interpret it *either as simply the act of a pious Jew or as an act of fidelity to Jesus*. However...the natural inference would probably be that Nicodemus...has gone public as a believer in Jesus...In John 3, Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, thus shrouding himself in the forces aligned against God & his light. Now, however, he comes in the light of day to retrieve Jesus' body...& give it the honorable burial it deserved. [The] audience...will...infer substantial & important character development. In Johannine [terms], *Nicodemus seems now to have been 'born of the spirit'* (3:6)" [Michael R. Whinton, *Configuring Nicodemus*, 115-6]
- "Nicodemus is introduced...perhaps significantly, *not until after* Joseph of Arimathea...a disciple in secret, has already secured permission to bury Jesus' body. Is Nicodemus to be seen now as a secret believer also? If so, why is this not stated explicitly, as it is for

Joseph...? Does his coming forward to bury Jesus constitute a public confession of his discipleship?" [R. Alan Culpepper, *Designs...in... John*, 251]

4. No record that he came to faith

- "Probably no passage in John...*is more ambiguous than* the dialogue between Jesus & Nicodemus in *John 3:1-15*. Frustrating as it may seem, however, the ambiguity is the clue to how the passage functions." [Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, p. 117]
- "It is striking that the...contrast between light & darkness is part of Jesus' encounter with *Nicodemus, who is one of the Gospel's most enigmatic figures*. The setting of the encounter is at night (3:2), but does that mean Nicodemus is simply in darkness or does the encounter suggest that he's coming to Jesus the light? His questions show that he does not understand Jesus, yet he does not reject Jesus. So where does that leave us as readers? Are we able to categorize him neatly or not? If not, what does that mean...?" [Craig R. Koester, "Foreword," in S. A. Hunt (ed.) *Character Studies in the 4th Gospel*, xx]
- "Some scholars [perceive]...ambiguity in Nicodemus' characterization, arguing that a positive characteristic counterbalances each suspicious trait. For e.g., the timing of Nicodemus' visit ('at night') counter-balances... his approaching Jesus...His mention of signs counters the fact that he addresses Jesus as 'Rabbi,' acknowledges Jesus as a teacher...from God [who] brought God to him...[J.] Bassler argues that Nicodemus is ambiguous in that he's...of 'two minds' &...to be of two minds, is still to be an outsider... Bennema rules that...John implicitly gives a negative evaluation of (his) ambiguity." [Michael R. Whinton, *Configuring Nicodemus*, 79-80]
- "Fittingly the narrative moves on after [Nicodemus'] conversation with Jesus *without a clearly demarcated conclusion*, just as his *ultimate response to Jesus is not clearly defined*." [R. Alan Culpepper, *Designs*, 246]
- "*There's no indication* in the story *that* after the extended speech of Jesus in 3:11-21 *Nicodemus finally 'got it.'* We do not read about a glimmer of recognition or hesitant attempt [by Nicodemus] to use the Johannine language himself." [Rohrbaugh, 2004 p. 155]
- "In my view, *Nicodemus is simply an ambiguous character*." [Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers*, p. 24]
- "Nicodemus' *primary characteristic is ambiguity*." [Jouette M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals" JBL 108, p. 645]
- "The characterization of *Nicodemus* in his three appearances *is ambiguous*...Some [scholars]...straddle the fence of ambiguity, accepting the indeterminacy of Nicodemus' ultimate fate ...M. Pamment...characterized him as '*the only individual character who fails to make a decision, 'uncondemned but uncommitted*.'" [David Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*, 64]
- "*Nicodemus is an enigmatic...character who is wavering in no man's land...between Jesus' opponents & his true disciples...In the end, this portrait remains ambiguous*." [R. Hakola, "Ambiguity," NTS 55 (2009) Abst.]
- "Those who trace the development of Nicodemus' faith [across the text: Jn. 3, 7, 19] seem to be *reading too much between the lines*. Nicodemus' appearances are far too brief & vague to allow us to conclude anything about his inner life. He certainly acts in a relatively positive way as he defends Jesus [to] his fellow Pharisees & honors Jesus by burying him properly. *It is too daring, however...to conclude that he...[has] become a full believer*." [Raimo Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity*, 136]

II. Seeing & entering the kingdom of God – 3:3,5

³ Jesus replied, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

A. The kingdom of God

1. God's final intervention through the Messiah
2. Dealing with all of humanities problems
- 3, Nicodemus would have been waiting for this

B. The kingdom never mentioned again

C. Possibly another way of saying eternal life

D. Without begin born from above one cannot see it nor be a part of it

III. The requirement of being born again

A. Being an Israelite did not give a person entrance into this kingdom

- "Although not everyone was to be included in this kingdom, Jews in Jesus' day generally believed that all Israelites would have a share in the world to come...Hence it is all the more remarkable that Jesus' stipulation that those who would enter God's kingdom must be "born of water & the Spirit" excludes Nicodemus & his fellow Sanhedrin members." [G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, *Comment. on NT use of the OT*, p 434]

B. Synonymous with:

1. born from above/again (3:3)

- The Greek word *an?then* means both "from above" and "again" or "anew". This double meaning is possible only in Greek...Jesus' expression "to be born *an?then*, to be born from above/again" challenges Nicodemus to move beyond surface meanings to a deeper meaning. When English translations resolve the tension in Jesus' words by reducing *an?then* to one of its meanings, the challenge to Nicodemus (and to the reader) is lost. The intentional double meaning of *an?then* must be kept in mind when reading this verse in order to discern Jesus' full meaning and the nature of Nicodemus's misunderstanding. [Gail O'Day, *John*, 468]

2. born of water and the Spirit (3:5)

- [I]f both water and Spirit mean "life" in the Gospel of John, then birth from 'water and Spirit' means the beginning of new life "from above," or what this Gospel calls "eternal life". ... "Born of water and Spirit," therefore, becomes simply the writer's way of actually replacing "kingdom of God" with "life" (the term "kingdom of God" never occurs again in the Gospel of John). ...It is confirmed by the fact that "water and Spirit" also evokes a

number of biblical prophecies about spiritual cleansing in connection with the promise of a new covenant with the people of Israel..." [J. Ramsey Michaels, John, p. 185]

a. Nicodemus should have known what water and spirit meant from Ezekiel 36-38

- Ezek. 36:24-27 ²⁵ I will also sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... ²⁷ I will place my Spirit within you ...
- Ezek. 37, 38

b. What changes people? – the Spirit

- Water renews, spirit gives life and restores
- New heart, new spirit, cleansing
- Titus 3:5 ⁵ he saved us ...through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit,

c. Preconceived ideas blind us to anything else

3. children of God who are born of God (1:12-13)

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

C. Spiritual birth cleanses from sin (water) and brings spiritual transformation (by the Spirit)

D. Different from being born of the flesh, which is mortal

E. There's a believing that's inadequate (based on signs alone, a one-time experience), we need new birth from above

IV. Application

A. Don't be ambiguous – a fence sitter

B. New birth gives new life, the eternal life

C. And entrance into the kingdom of God