

### JN 3.3 Notes:

Nicodemus is a seeker who believed in the miracles of Jesus, but still had not come to faith in His true identity as God in the flesh. He came “by night,” (John mentions this again in 19.38, so it matters), a description that probably has a double meaning for John: (1) symbolically, he is coming out of spiritual darkness into the Light of God’s revelation in Christ, and (2) culturally, to travel to meet and then “study” with a Rabbi by night was an indication of his hunger to know Jesus.

Nicodemus “sees” God at work in the ministry of Jesus: “We know you have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do the miracles you are doing unless God is with him.” 3.2 He speaks confidently: “we know,” but Jesus cuts him off with a shocking statement. He is saying to Nicodemus: “You think you can see God at work. But you the truth is you are blind until you believe in Me. You cannot “see” anything in the Kingdom of God at all right now. Something drastic has to happen first.”

This was confounding to Nicodemus, and all the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, whom He is addressing through the conversation with Nicodemus. (Jesus shifts from using the 2nd person singular to the plural later in the conversation—He is addressing all Jews and indeed, all people in this conversation.) Nicodemus is a premier Bible teacher of the nation, male, a member of the ruling council of Israel, the Sanhedrin, rich, a Pharisee (considered to be the spiritual elite of their society), and a faithful, devout Jew. There is no one more pleasing to God than a man like him in popular thinking. And yet Jesus evaluates Nicodemus’ condition and determines that his is spiritually blinder than a bat, because he has NO heart mechanism that allows Him to truly understand, or “see” God. What is lacking? Everything! Jesus says he has to start all over again from scratch...to be born again.

“Truly, Truly...” This is the second use of this important phrase in John. Several follow in this conversation. These are the most important declarations of Jesus’ ministry, so we must pay attention.

“Unless a person is born again from above...” John uses another word with double meaning here. That is why I have included both in my translation. It is a deliberate word-play by John. The Greek “anothen” can mean “again,” or “from above.” He meant both. Jesus is speaking of a second birth, not of a human origin, but from a Divine source, the Holy Spirit. The rest of the dialogue through verse 13 explains this concept. Nicodemus both misunderstands what Jesus is saying, and fails to comprehend it as well.

“they cannot see the Kingdom...” Just as physical sight is a normally an ability God gives a person at birth, so spiritual sight comes from spiritual birth. The power to “see” the Kingdom... God’s sovereign reign over all creation in Jesus, comes from a set of spiritual abilities that belong to Holy Spirit-birth, not our physical eyes. Without this second birth we are “blind” as far as the reality of the Kingdom is concerned.

Nicodemus is an example of every person in the world. We are all born physically without spiritual eyes to “see” or truly perceive and understand the Kingdom of God. As God’s reign is the basic sub-structure of reality that allows everything else in creation to both exist, and to function, inability to “see” the Kingdom of God and function within it is a very serious problem indeed! We can have Bible knowledge, comprehensive theology, religious experience, “spirituality,” fervent church attendance, and everything else our physical capabilities afford us, but without the power of the Holy Spirit creating a NEW nature and capabilities within us, we are constitutionally unable to experience God’s reign within us, and around us. There are no exceptions to this fact.

### John 3.5 Notes

This conversation is a classic example of one of John’s most pervasive narrative techniques: the use of misunderstanding. No matter who Jesus is speaking with, they almost always misunderstand what He is saying, and ask questions. As Jesus gives more information new misunderstandings emerge. This is a clever approach, because most of John’s readers have the same misunderstandings as the characters in the dialogue, and John is actually addressing them through the conversations. We will see over and over that

people's objections to believing in Jesus are based upon faulty understanding, or no understanding at all. That is why Jesus taught and preached the good news—to give clear understanding of the things of heaven that are real on earth!

We also need to note that Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus follows a Trinitarian outline. The topic is the nature of salvation, and Jesus explains that it is not the result of works, but by believing in Him as Messiah on the human side, and because of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit (3.3-10) and the Son (3.11-15), according to the plan of the Father (3.16-21) on the Divine side. In the current section Jesus is focusing on the work of the Holy Spirit that is essential for salvation.

Nicodemus has asked two questions in 3.4 related to the question "how?" that show he is misunderstanding Jesus to be speaking of a literal second physical birth. That causes him to see two impossible barriers: space and time. Babies are born "young," and he is already "old." How can time be reversed like that? Second, birth occurs from the womb, a place he has no way to re-enter at this point in his life. These are huge problems to be sure, but they are completely irrelevant because Jesus is NOT talking about a second birth from the womb, but "from above," by the Holy Spirit. So Jesus clarifies this key point.

In the 3rd "Truly, truly" statement of this gospel, and the 2nd in this conversation, Jesus explains that the first birth is "of water," and the second birth is of "the Spirit." Many people over the years have taken "water" here to mean baptism. However, in the New Testament baptism always follows saving faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and is a witness to what the believer has already experienced in Jesus. Baptism is never simultaneous with the act of believing in the Scriptures, yet Jesus teaches that being "born of the Spirit" is the beginning of salvation in this passage. So He could not have meant "baptism" by His use of water here. Furthermore, to clarify this point Jesus says next: "That which born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." 3.6 The whole point of clarification is that the first birth is physical, "of flesh," and involves "water," and the second birth is "from above," is "of the Spirit," and involves "spirit." So what is this "water" of physical birth that Jesus speaks of?

During pregnancy the developing fetus is protected by its immersion (the meaning of the Greek word 'baptisma) in the amniotic fluid that fills the womb. In every culture, including Jesus and Nicodemus, we simply call this "water," as it is primarily comprised of H<sub>2</sub>O. We say "her water broke" when the sac is ruptured and the "water" leaves the womb. No baby is physically birthed without this "water" coming forth first, so this term was used to mean birth. The whole point is that the second birth is not "of water," or "of the flesh," or physical, like our first birth. Nicodemus mistakenly assumed that. Therefore, Jesus' point is that the second birth occurs by the power of the Holy Spirit. We will examine this further in the next "Daily Word." I have gone into this detail about "water" because it is one of the most misunderstood words of Jesus in the passage, and indeed, the gospel of John.

Jesus said a person "cannot enter the Kingdom of God" without Holy Spirit birth from above. "Enter" is almost the same in meaning as "see" in verse 3, but it adds clarification to the "birth" image. We think of birth as a beginning, but it is actually a transition of a living being from one environment to another. The baby is alive and developing in the womb, and exits one "world" to enter another. The significance of this truth can be seen with any mother who gives birth to an already dead child. The transition occurs, but without a continuing life a "birth" is no real birth at all. Birth means we enter a new world, in this case the Kingdom of God. Just as we cannot understand or perceive ("see") the nature of the Kingdom without the work of the Holy Spirit, we cannot enter into the experience of it without the power of the Spirit. This is a key point. The new birth does not change us, so much as it transitions us into a whole new environment, in which Jesus reigns, His values and ways of doing things are normal and customary, and a new language of love is spoken. It is like moving to a different country that is completely different from your own: we become citizens of the Kingdom of God, and we have an eternal journey of learning God's kind of lifestyle in that place!

### JN 3.6 Notes

Jesus used a word-play throughout this conversation to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in the second birth. All the original gospel readers picked up on it instantly. Unfortunately, translations cannot express this facet of His message. In Greek the words for “breath,” “spirit,” and “wind” are all the same: *pneuma*. This provides a major insight into what Jesus is saying. It underscores the idea of the second birth from above as a transition into a new world. Let’s explore this a bit. In the womb it is the mother who does the breathing for both herself, and the growing life within her. The fetus does not breathe by itself. What is the first action that baby needs to take in order to enter the new world? Breathe. God created us to live physically in an environment of air in our first birth. I well remember the panic that flooded through me when our first grandchild was born unable to take in air because of clogged breathing passages. No breath, no life; that’s it. The doctor was working furiously on her for what seemed like an eternity. What a relief when we heard that first cry, because it meant she had the breath to sustain her life, and she would live! Air is the environment of the first-birth world; the Holy Spirit is the environment of the second-birth world.

Now, remember what happened at the creation of the human race. “Then the Lord God created man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” Gen. 2.7 This the birth of Adam, when he began to breathe! And, in the Gospel of John after the resurrection, Jesus illustrated this image even further like this: “As the Father sent me, I send you.” After saying this He breathed upon them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” 20.21B-22 Just like Gen 2.7, the verb translated “breathed” is the same word in Greek as “Spirit.” In other words, it is the Spirit, or Breath of God, that provides the basic living environment in the second major transition of our life, into the Kingdom of God. What air and breathing is to our first birth, the Spirit and His constant in-filling is to our second birth into the Kingdom of God. As Paul said: “The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the realm of the Holy Spirit.” Rom 14.17 No Spirit, no transition into the new world. (Jesus also plays on the meaning of “wind” for “Spirit” in 3.8, and we will deal with that saying later.)

We should also note that John records Jesus using this “spirit/breath” word-play as the first of three images for the most basic needs of life: breath (Ch. 3), water (Ch. 4), and food/bread (Ch. 6). In other words, we need Jesus more than air, water, or food. He is LIFE in all the abundance of what it means for GOD to live, and He gives this Life to all who believe in Him. We have so much to look forward to as we work our way through all these Sayings of Jesus in John.

The Holy Spirit is the “atmosphere” of the Kingdom; the power that makes it work. He allows us to enter into it when HE enters into us, like breathing air into our lungs. This “new world” of the Kingdom is diametrically opposed to this world. Literally, you go “down” to go “up” in the Kingdom. Consider these words: “That which is highly esteemed in the eyes of people is detestable in the sight of God.” Luke 16.15B The Kingdom is a realm in which King Jesus is “all, and in all,” and “all things are from Him, and through Him, and for Him.” Only the power of the Holy Spirit can convince sinful, self-centered people like you and me that life is all about Him, not us, and fill us with fiery-hearted abandonment to HIS glory and honor, even at the cost of our very lives. That is merely the normal attitude of Kingdom-disciples.

### JN 3.7 Notes

This verse records another of Jesus’ commands: “Don’t be surprised...” This is a general-principle type imperative, spoken to Nicodemus, but it applies to all people, because Jesus deliberately used the second person plural in His quote: “You must ALL be born again from above.” This double command: “Do not be surprised by what I am telling you,” and “it is necessary for you all to be born again from above.” needs to be clearly communicated to every person in the world, because it is truth from the very throne of God to each individual.

John records the first of seven “it is necessary” statements in this saying. “It is necessary for you all to be born again from above.” This Holy Spirit new birth is not just an option, it is necessary and essential for everyone, and anyone in order to be saved. This truth applies to every person in the world, not just Nicodemus.

Nicodemus' mind and heart are reeling with what Jesus has said to him. He was used to the kind of praise and esteem from his peers that we reserve for Presidents and leaders of State at their inauguration. Now Jesus is telling him that he knows nothing at all; that he has not even taken the first baby step into God's Kingdom yet. This is beyond humbling, it is devastating to a man like Nicodemus. That is why Jesus says "Don't be surprised." Don't waste time with getting caught up with emotional reactions; instead, take action to preserve your life. When someone is banging on the door screaming "your house is on fire," the emotional impact is overwhelming to be sure, but survival depends upon setting aside all those feelings, and exercising your will to respond to the truth. Prompt action opens a window of opportunity to save your life. Jesus is screaming "fire!" here. Later in His ministry He will say: "You must enter the Kingdom of God like a tiny child." Accepting our complete, helpless inability to save ourselves is humbling for every person, not just a hot-shot like Nicodemus. No one is capable of giving birth to themselves, either physically or spiritually. We receive the new birth through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, or it does not happen at all. Pride will not save anybody. Humility will.

When Jesus says He is telling us something absolutely essential we ignore His command to our sure destruction. That is why LOVE speaks in absolute imperatives when it comes to the most important survival truths of life. No one apologizes for giving commands that save life, in fact it negligent and indeed hateful behavior NOT to do so when the consequences of not acting mean death. Bottles containing substances that kill say "DO NOT DRINK: POISON!" in the clearest possible terms for a reason. That is the kind of ultra serious warning Jesus is giving the human race through these words.

#### JN 3.8 Notes

Jesus' word-play of "pneuma" meaning "wind/breath/Spirit" has a powerful Old Testament background in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Nicodemus should have picked this up right away. In Ezekiel 36.26, 27 God promises to place His Spirit within His people, and thereby cause them to obey Him. He also promises to restore His people from captivity in Babylon back to the land of Judah. Chapter 37 expands on these thoughts with an unforgettable prophecy. Ezekiel sees a valley filled with dead, dry bones. This is a picture of Israel in captivity. God asks him: "Can they live?" 37.3 God tells his prophet to preach to the bones by saying: "I will make my breath (Spirit) enter into you, and you will come to life." As the bones begin to live God next tells Ezekiel to "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say: 'Come from the four winds, o breath, and breathe into these bones, that they may live.'" 37.9 Immediately the bones grow flesh and come together as resurrected men, who then form an army. This powerful vision of the Spirit coming out of the blowing winds to breathe life into dead bones and give them a second "birth" created a rich Biblical background for Jesus' words to Nicodemus. He is using precisely the same word-play in John 3.

Jesus turns in verse 8 to the "wind" imagery for the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to note that on the day of Pentecost, when Jesus' words regarding the Holy Spirit were ultimately fulfilled, Luke tells us that the coming of the Holy Spirit to simultaneously indwell ALL believers in Jesus was marked by the sound of a rushing, mighty wind. Acts 2.2 The sound and feel of the wind was a tangible expression of the Presence and coming of the invisible Holy Spirit into them. That is Jesus' point about the new birth to Nicodemus. Wind is invisible to the eye, yet its effects are clearly visible... we can observe its impact. Jesus also pointed out that wind is sovereign: it blows "where it wills" and people cannot control its direction or force. We can only adjust to it. In the same way, we cannot see the Holy Spirit with our first-birth eyes, but we can see His effects: the Spirit convinces people of the reality of Jesus as LORD, and cause them to joyfully, even gleefully enter into slavery to Him as His obedient servants, overflowing with gratitude and wonder at the high privilege of entering into His Kingdom reign. And, none of us can control His Majesty, the Holy Spirit, but we can and must adjust ourselves to Him by following His leadership. This image of a blowing wind for the Spirit gives us a vivid reminder of His surpassing power.

There is a contrast between the images of breath and wind. A baby's first breath kicks off a reliable long-term process. The Holy Spirit fills and refills believers in an ongoing way, like breathing air. On the other hand, the "wind" is much more elusive than air for breathing. It is powerful to be sure, but the ebb and flow of the wind's movement, and its passing nature make it hard to keep up with it. It requires great sensitivity to follow

the wind, and to be led by the Spirit. Breathing the Spirit like air speaks to our ongoing dependence on His Presence. Following the Spirit like wind addresses our need for constant submissiveness and sensitivity to His direction. Both attitudes toward the Spirit are essential for Kingdom life.

### JN 3.9 Notes

In spite of Jesus' extensive word-play explanation concerning the Holy Spirit's work in imparting the "second birth from above," Nicodemus is still unable to understand this teaching. He has said for the second time: "How can these things be?" (3.4, 9) There are at least two barriers that Nicodemus must overcome. First, the idea that every person ("you must all...") should have a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit is too much for him. Under the old covenant, the ministry of the Holy Spirit was basically restricted to prophets, kings, and high priests. It was not normative for every believer to experience the Spirit in the way Jesus was describing. To this day the people of the old covenant do not experience or expect the ministry of the Holy Spirit on a personal level. Out of all world religions, it is a uniquely Christian claim that every believer becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, lives by His power, and follows His intimate leadership. But, Jesus expected "the (Bible) teacher of Israel" to know and understand the Old Testament promises of the Holy Spirit like Ezekiel 36 and 37, or Joel 2.28-32, to name just two among many. Understanding the Person and work of the Holy Spirit necessitates the concept of the Trinity, and Nicodemus was not ready to go there. That was problem one. It was the same problem faced by all monotheistic people in the first century, and today. But problem two was the decisive issue for Nicodemus, and every seeker. Here it is.

Like everyone else of his day, Nicodemus also misunderstood the Person and work of the Messiah. Over the years the Jewish people had accumulated some accurate Biblical expectations regarding the coming "Anointed One" (the meaning of "Messiah" in Hebrew, "Christ" in Greek), misunderstood other Biblical prophecies, and completely missed out on other aspects of the promises regarding the Messiah, such as His sufferings and death. The "popular theology," or common beliefs and expectations about the Anointed One were therefore substantially different from the Reality of the Messiah that Nicodemus was conversing with. Jesus calls him "the teacher" with the view that Nicodemus was one of the recognized and preeminent teachers of the old Testament, and therefore Jesus expected him to understand the Biblical truths He was referring to. But, Nicodemus did not understand at all.

Basic among the Biblical promises about the "Anointed One" was the prophecy that He would bestow the same "anointing" of the Holy Spirit upon all who believed in Him. Furthermore, Nicodemus was familiar with the preaching of John the Baptist, who made this promise his major emphasis about the coming Messiah: "I baptize you in water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is much mightier than I, and I am not even worthy to stoop down and remove his sandals; He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." MT 3.12; L 3.16; J 1.33 One of the essential characteristics of God's "Anointed One" would be His ability to extend His anointing to every one who believed in Him. In other words Messiah would inaugurate the new Kingdom age, in which God pours out His Spirit "on all flesh," not just a privileged few. This was Peter's main point in His message on the day of Pentecost, and His conclusion: "Therefore, having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, HE has poured forth this which you both see and hear." Acts. 2.33. "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both LORD and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." A 2.36 Nicodemus, and indeed all the Jewish people completely missed this vital truth about Messiah: not only would He combine the Old Testament offices of Prophet, High Priest, and King in the anointed power of the Spirit in His own ministry, Messiah would also pour forth that same Spirit upon every believer, bar none, and therefore open up the "second birth from above" to all who came to Him by faith. (The Gospel of John records more of the theology of Jesus about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit than any other gospel (by far), and we will pay close attention to those passages as we come to them.)

If we misunderstand the Person and work of the Messiah, we will also inevitably misunderstand the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. That is why it is SO important to really see and know Jesus through His Word. Every word Jesus spoke, and every example He gave concerning the Holy Spirit should be carefully studied by every disciple.