

John 3:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 3 verses 1 to 21. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. John chapter 3 is one of the most famous passages within the New Testament, and Jesus' teaching concerning being born again within it has been central to countless evangelistic messages. For many, the notion of being born again has come to represent the importance of conversion, of entrance into new spiritual life, of entering into a new filial relationship with God as a dearly loved son, and enjoying a transformation of the heart. While these things are deeply important for our understanding of Christian salvation and the life of faith, in the context of the gospel itself, there is a deeper and more complex theology at play, one which can unpack and considerably enrich what most people have understood being born again to mean. Within the Old Testament, concepts of birth are already been brought into relationship with concepts of resurrection. In Isaiah chapter 26, verse 17 to 19, like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth, so were we because of you, O Lord. We were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind.

We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth, and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy, for your Jew is a Jew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Elsewhere a connection is drawn between the womb and the tomb or the earth. Job chapter 1, verse 21, and he said, Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.

[3 : 5 6] Blessed be the name of the Lord. In Psalm 139, verse 15, My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Going back further, we can see parallels between the womb and the earth in the curses of Genesis chapter 3, both being frustrated sources of fruit. The first man, Adam, was taken from the earth, and all

subsequent men are taken from the refined human earth of their mother's wombs.

The story of the Exodus is told as an event of new birth. Israel is being born from the land of Egypt, the womb of Egypt is being opened, and Israel is coming forth as God's firstborn son. Just as the Passover emphasizes the firstborn, and the law of the firstborn immediately follows in chapter 13, so Israel is being born to new life. This is one of the reasons why stories of women struggling in birth are so prominent at the beginning of the Exodus narrative. The new Exodus that Jesus is going to accomplish is also a new birth, as we see in places like John chapter 16, verse 21, where Jesus speaks of the woman whose hour has come, pregnant language within the context of John's gospel, who gives birth to a man. The new birth being referred to in this context is clearly Christ's resurrection. All of this background is important to bear in mind when reading Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus.

Nicodemus is one of the leading Pharisees, but he recognizes that Jesus is a true prophet sent by God. Nicodemus' question to Jesus may not be the facetious and dismissive one that some think it might be.

Rather, it may be asking the question of how, after all of its history, Israel and the Jews could return and be reborn as a people. What might that mean or look like? Within covenant history, there are a number of cycles of wombs and births. I've already mentioned the story of the Exodus. Israel entered into the womb of Egypt and was reborn in a new form. Israel has died in the event of exile. When they returned, there was another sort of rebirth. Likewise, in Christ's death and resurrection, there will be a further event of rebirth that occurs. As in the case of the Exodus from Egypt, the people that pass through Christ's death and resurrection will emerge as new and transformed people. Being born of water and the Spirit could be two ways of speaking of the same thing. Perhaps the water is a metaphor for the Spirit.

Alternatively, historically, many have seen it as a reference to Christian baptism, where people are baptised with water and receive the Holy Spirit. Another possibility is that being born of water refers to the baptism of John, and being born of the Spirit refers to the baptism that Jesus brings at Pentecost. We might find some clue to the meaning of this expression in 1 John chapter 5 verses 6 to 8.

[6 : 42] This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. There the reference seems to be to Jesus' baptism and his death. Christ comes not merely through his anointing with the Spirit and declaration of sonship in his baptism in the Jordan, but also through his laying down of his life at Calvary. In a similar manner, perhaps, entrance into the new age occurs through the baptism of John and Jesus' baptism of his church by the Spirit at Pentecost. The contrast between flesh and Spirit is one that is found in various different places in Scripture. In Isaiah chapter 31 verse 3, for instance, it is the contrast between the weakness of mortal flesh and the strength of God's Spirit. Later in John chapter 6 verse 63, Jesus distinguishes between the flesh and the Spirit. The Spirit is the source of life, whereas the flesh lacks potency. The contrast between the flesh and the Spirit is, of course, most pronounced and developed in the teaching of the Apostle Paul. The point that Jesus is making here concerns the relationship between origin and character. The need for a birth from above, or a new birth, is because our mortal, weak, and sinful nature, the flesh, is utterly unsuited for the kingdom of God. To enter that kingdom, we need a new source of our existence, appropriate to it.

Interestingly, this is only one of two occasions in the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of the kingdom, a concept that is pervasive in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus says, You must be born again. The you here is plural. Nicodemus is the teacher of Israel, and it is Israel as a nation that must be resurrected. While individual persons participate in this resurrection, it is important to appreciate that the new birth Jesus is referring to is an event in covenant history, not just a private experience in the human soul. In chapter 8 verse 14, Jesus speaks concerning himself in a manner that recalls verse 8 of this chapter.

Jesus answered, Jesus is the true man of the Spirit. To be born of the Spirit is to enter into his life. Because people do not understand the origin of the Spirit, they do not understand people who have the character of the Spirit. They act in ways and according to motives that they cannot understand. Jesus is the first to be born again, the first to return to the womb of the earth and be raised again as the firstborn of the dead.

Jesus is the one who opens the womb of the tomb, so that we also might one day be reborn from the womb of the tomb. Nicodemus struggles to understand any of this. Although he is one of the leading teachers of the Jews, he still doesn't grasp or receive what Jesus is saying. Jesus hasn't even been telling him about heavenly realities, of which he is qualified to speak as one who has come from above himself.

If even earthly truths are beyond the apprehension of this leading teacher of Israel, it is a sign of the insufficiency of the flesh. Even the wisest and most educated of persons in the flesh is unable to grasp the things of the Spirit.

[10:03] In verse 14, Jesus relates his death to the events of Numbers chapter 21, an episode during the wilderness period of the Exodus. Afflicted with deathly serpents on account of their sin, the Israelites were delivered as the Lord instructed Moses to raise up a bronze serpent.

In verses 8 to 10 of that chapter, And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Moses raised up the bronze serpent in order that the Israelites, who were bitten by fiery serpents on account of their rebellion, could look at the bronze serpent and be healed. Jesus talks about his death in a similar way.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' cross plays a similar role to the serpent lifted up. In the Septuagint translation of the Numbers account, the serpent is raised up as a sign.

Jesus is also raised up as a sign. As people look to him in faith, they will be healed. We are also here seeing the way that the cross itself is regarded as part of Christ's elevation, rather than merely in terms of descent.

[11:14] In contrast to the synoptic Gospels, the cross in John's Gospel is already part of Jesus' glorification, already part of his ascension. He is being raised up as a sign to the peoples.

In the narrative of John's Gospel, there is a progressive movement upward, up to Jerusalem, up to the cross, up from the grave, and up to heaven. More generally, the vertical polarity, the relationship between above and below, heaven and earth, is very pronounced within this chapter.

It connects with the spirit-flesh polarity in various other ways. John doesn't merely compare Jesus to the elevated bronze serpent. He is rather the serpent which Moses lifted up in the wilderness.

In addition to the comparison, then, between Jesus and the bronze serpent, there is also an implicit reiteration of the relationship between Moses and Jesus. Here Moses, who bore witness to Christ's glory on Mount Sinai, also typologically raised him up as a symbol to the people, that they might find healing through him.

Perhaps the mention of the wilderness has significance here as well. The wilderness, according to Isaiah chapter 40, was supposed to be the staging ground for the new exodus, as we've already seen in the case of John the witness, who described himself as a voice crying in the wilderness.

[12:29] We could also think of Isaiah's references to God raising up a standard as part of the new exodus. The Lord is going to raise up a banner, as it were, and all the people will follow and flock to it.

This might be part of the background in view here. God is going to raise up this rallying and healing banner for the new exodus, the banner being the cross of Christ. Christians have long treated the cross as a symbol or banner that we follow or gather under.

Jesus is the personal expression of the love of God, the source of salvation to all who will believe in him. He comes to bring deliverance and life, but his coming also provokes judgment.

While that is not the intent of his coming, it's one of the secondary effects. He is the light that exposes people's true character as the wicked who are committed to their evil deeds shrink away from him, rejecting the life that he offers.

A question to consider. Why do you think that John, in contrast to the other Gospels, mentions the kingdom of God so rarely?