

# Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

## John 3: 1-21

**DIG:** What is significant about Nicodemus' name? What else do we know about him? Why did he come to Jesus? Why at night? Why were the ideas about birth different between them? How many times had Nicodemus been **born again** in his own thinking? What **two basic steps** did Yeshua teach for a rebirth and entrance into **the Kingdom**? From verses 16-18, what stands out to you about **God**? About what **He** wants to do? About how a person is condemned? According to verse 21 how will true belief show itself? How would you define being **born again** to one who had never heard the term?

**REFLECT:** What first aroused you about **Jesus**? Why? How old were you? Where are you right now in the birthing process of spiritual life: Not yet conceived? Developing, but not "showing" yet? Very pregnant and waiting for your "water" to break? Kicking and screaming like an infant? Growing daily? Can you explain your spiritual birthing process (when you were **born again**) in a few minutes?

Shortly after **His** baptism, **the Lord** began **His** ministry of proclaiming **Himself** to be **the Messiah** of Isra'el. **He** performed many signs and miracles to authenticate **His** claim (see my commentary on **Isaiah 61 - The Three Messianic Miracles**). Now while **He** was in Yerushalayim at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs **He** was performing and believed in **His** name (John 2:23). As a result of **His** miracles, many had faith and believed **His** claim that **He** was indeed **the Jewish Meshiach**. Standing in the crowd and observing many of these miracles was a man by the name of **Nicodemus**. We can discover much about this man from **his** name.

It was a custom at that time amongst the Jews, for the parents to give their boys two names, a Jewish name and a *Gentile* name. It was so in the case of the great Apostle, his Jewish name being Sha'ul, and his *Gentile* name, Paul. The name **Nicodemus** (Hebrew: **Nakdimon**) is made up of two words, a word that means *to conquer*, and another that means *the common people*. Together his name meant *One who conquers the people*. This name was given to **him** at birth. The pharisaic tradition at that time included this idea, namely, that of a subjection of *the common people*. Our **Savior** spoke of the burdens that **the Pharisees** put upon the backs of the common people with the Oral Law (see **Ei - The Oral Law**).

The fact that **Nicodemus** preferred to be known in **Jerusalem** by his Greek rather than **his** Hebrew name indicates that **he** had a definite leaning towards Greek culture. It might even indicate that **he** was a Hellenist, namely, a **Jew** who read the TaNaKh in the Greek

translation called the Septuagint. He was certainly learned in Greek and there was a sentiment in Isra'el against Hellenism. This can be seen in the initial messianic movement after Shavu'ot. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). This feeling certainly must have been most intense in Yerushalayim, the center of Jewish culture. This would indicate that Nakdimon was a prominent man in Jerusalem, and powerful enough to be able to maintain his position in spite of the antagonism that his Hellenism aroused.<sup>331</sup>

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council (Yochanan 3:1). First, we know that he was a Pharisee, which means he was a rabbi. It is important to know what Nakdimon believed when he came to secretly talk to Jesus. The rabbis taught that, "All Isra'el had a share in the Age to come." In other words, anyone who was born a Jew would automatically enter the kingdom of God by birthright. Any Gentile had to convert to enter the kingdom of God. However, the Jews would say, "We are children of Abraham."

Another teaching of the rabbis was that anyone who was circumcised would not end up in Gehenna, or hell, but would end up in the kingdom of God. This was all well and good in the first century. By the second century, however, the rabbis were confronted with Jewish believers in Yeshua. Now the rabbis wanted them to go to hell. So on the one hand, they decreed that when a circumcised Jewish believer died, an angel from heaven came down and sewed his foreskin back on so he would end up in hell after all. But on the other hand, if by some heavenly bureaucratic mistake a Jew was assigned to hell, no problem. The rabbis taught that if you were born a Jew, you didn't have to worry because Abraham sat at the gates of Gehenna and would snatch any Israelite away from the flames.

The second thing we learn about Nicodemus was that he was a member of the Great Sanhedrin (see Lg - The Great Sanhedrin), or the ruling council. He was the teacher of a rabbinic academy (see below) and about 50 years old.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he didn't want anyone to know he was there. At this point, if he were even seen talking to the trouble-making Nazarene it could cost him both socially and financially. The Pharisees were known to put people out of the synagogue for believing in the Lord (John 9:22). He also knew that the darkness would afford him an uninterrupted time to talk to Yeshua. Rabbi, Nakdimon began courteously, stepping into the light coming from the flames: We know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him (Yochanan 3:2). Nicodemus might have been apprehensive about the possible reaction of his fellow

Sanhedrin members, or even intimidated by **the Galilean Rabbi Himself**, but nevertheless, **he** came - unlike **his** colleagues - with a sincere desire to learn.

**Jesus**, who knew what was in each person (**John 2:24b**), understood what was really going on in **Nakdimon's** heart. **The Lord** ignored **his** initial flattery and, instead, answered a question **he** didn't even ask. Without confirming, denying, refuting or even acknowledging **Nicodemus'** statement that **He** was from **God**, **Jesus** gave an answer that demonstrated **His** omniscience. **Messiah** confronted **Nicodemus** with the fact that **he** had fallen short of reaching **the Kingdom**.<sup>332</sup> Immediately getting to the heart of the matter, **He** replied: **Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again** (**John 3:3**). Our **Savior** called for nothing less than complete regeneration. Without such a spiritual rebirth, **He** told **His** nighttime visitor, no one has any hope of attaining **eternal life**. There was no middle ground. No compromise.

It is important to understand **Nicodemus'** frame of reference. As Arnold Fruchtenbaum discusses at length, the term **born again** was common in pharisaic writings. **The rabbis taught that there were six ways of being born again, and all six were physical. First, when Gentiles were converted to Judaism they were considered to be born again. Nicodemus** did not qualify because **he** was Jewish. **Secondly, a man was considered born again if he were crowned king.** Once again, **Nakdimon** did not qualify because nothing is said about **him** being from the house of David, or royal lineage.

But there were four other ways to be **born again**, and **Nicodemus** qualified for all four. **First, a 13-year-old boy was considered born again at his bar mitzvah (a form of Jewish confirmation). At that time he subjects himself to all the commandments of the Torah, is responsible for his own sin, is viewed as an adult by the Jewish community and is legally able to participate in the synagogue. Nakdimon** qualified, **he** was beyond the age of thirteen and **he** had already experienced **his** bar mitzvah. **Secondly, when a Jew was married, he was said to be born again.** To be a member of the Jewish ruling council one had to be married between the ages of 16 and 20. Since **he** was a member of the Great Sanhedrin **he** had to be married. Thus, we must assume that **Nicodemus** was married and that **he** qualified. **Thirdly, an ordained rabbi was considered born again at the age of 30. Nakdimon** qualified, **he** was a rabbi. **The final way to be born again in Judaism was to become the head of a rabbinic academy.** In verse 10, **Jesus** said to **Nicodemus** that **he** was **the teacher of Isra'el**, and the one who was about 50 and the head of a rabbinic academy was always referred to as **the teacher of Isra'el**. Once again, **Nicodemus** qualified. **He** had undergone every process available in Judaism to be **born again**. There was no other way except to enter **his mother's womb** and start the whole process over again.

That's why Nicodemus asked: **How can someone be born again when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born**" (John 3:4)! He was saying, "Hey, I've used up all my options. Shall I become a fetus **again**? Do I start the process all over again and become **born again** at 13, 20, 30 and 50? I don't get it!"

It was to this problem of pharisaic Judaism that Yeshua addressed Himself. Then the Lord uses a common way of Jewish teaching. He went from *the known*, being **born again**, to the *unknown*, its spiritual ramifications. In pharisaic Judaism it was given a strictly physical connotation. So He moved from the physical realm to the spiritual realm: **Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit** (Yochanan 3:5). The Jewish phrase "to be born of water," meant to be born physically a Jew. And as far as the Pharisees were concerned being **born** a Jew was enough to enter **the kingdom of God**. But Jesus told Nikdimon that being born **of water**, or physically being a Jew, was not enough. He said: **You must be born** of both **water and the Spirit**. In other words, there are two kinds of births, one physical and the other spiritual, to qualify for **the kingdom of God**.

Then Christ defined the difference: **Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit** (John 3:6). Here again, Jesus clearly explained the two kinds of births. To be **born of water** is to **be born of the flesh**, and that which is **born of flesh** is **flesh**. This **birth** is not enough to enter **the Kingdom**. **You should not be surprised at my saying, "You** (plural in the Greek) **must be born again"** (Yochanan 3:7). There must be a spiritual **birth** subsequent to the physical **birth**. Therefore, Nicodemus' being **born** a Jew was insufficient; he needed a spiritual rebirth to really be **born again** in the way that God required.

**The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit** (John 3:8). **You** may not understand how or why **the wind blows**; but **you** can see what it does. **You** may not understand where a gale came from or where it is going to, but **you** can see the trial of flattened fields and uprooted trees that **it** leaves behind. There are many things about **the wind** **you** may not understand; but its effects are plainly seen. Jesus said that **the Spirit** is exactly the same. **You** may not know how **the Spirit** works; but **you** can see **the Spirit's** effect in the lives of believers.<sup>333</sup> It's called spiritual **fruit**. Rabbi Sha'ul tells us that **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23a).

Nicodemus' next question revealed the turmoil in his heart: **How can this be** (Yochanan 3:9)? He couldn't believe what he was hearing. **"You are Israel's teacher,"** said Jesus, **"and do you not understand these things?"** Thus, he was looked upon as an outstanding teacher of Isra'el. **Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to**

what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony (Yochanan 3:10-11). Yeshua answers the: we know, of Nicodemus in verse 2, with the: we know, here. When Nakdimon used the expression, he was speaking for a specific group of people, the Great Sanhedrin. When the Lord used the expression, He was also speaking for a specific group of people, namely, those who had been born again. Continuing to press the point, the Meshiach said: I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things (John 3:12)? Nicodemus said he didn't understand. Jesus wanted him to know that faith comes before full understanding (First Corinthians 2:14). Spiritual truth doesn't register in the mind of someone who doesn't believe. Unbelief understands nothing. That rebuke from the Lord silenced Nicodemus completely. We have no record of any more responses from him that night; he probably just stood there in stunned silence.

So Nicodemus being born a Jew was not sufficient. He needed a spiritual rebirth to really be born again in the way that is required. And what way is that? Jesus taught two basic steps for a rebirth and entrance into the Kingdom. No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man (John 3:13). In this context, Jesus is referring to His authority to bring a message from heaven. The point here is that no one has ascended to heaven to bring an authoritative message back from ADONAI. So we are totally dependent upon Yeshua. He has the authority to speak concerning heavenly things since He came from heaven.<sup>334</sup> The Lord reminded Nakdimon of the wilderness experience of the Jews who were on the way to the Promised Land. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4-9), so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him (Yochanan 3:14-15).

The issue was sin. Jesus challenged that great teacher of the Torah to acknowledge that the snake, the Adversary, had bitten him and he needed to come to the Lord for salvation. Normally, a Pharisee would have despised the very idea because it would cut to the core of his self-righteousness. Christ exposed the painful reality that he needed to admit his sin and repent. He needed to include himself among the sinful, snake-bitten, repentant Israelites.

First, ADONAI took one step toward us, and second, we must take the other step toward Him. The step by God is the death of the God-Man, Yeshua the Messiah. He was lifted up onto the cross to die for the sins of the world. But now mankind has the obligation of believing in Christ and what He did on the cross in order to have eternal life. The rabbis taught that everything depended upon the intent of the heart, not on the mere outward deed, just as it was not Moses lifting up his hands that gave Isra'el the victory (see my commentary on Exodus Cv - The Amalekites Came and Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim) nor yet the lifting up of the bronze snake that healed, but the upturning of the heart of Isra'el to ADONAI.<sup>335</sup>

These same two steps are repeated in John 3:16-18. **For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).** There are two parts. **God** did **His** part by sending **His one and only Son** (this does not save), **and** we do our part by believing/trusting/having faith that **Jesus** is who **He** said **He** is (this part saves): **That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (First Corinthians 15:3b-4).**

There are four words in the Greek language that mean **love**. One is *erao*, which refers to a *passionate love*, either good or bad, according to the context. This would not do here. Another is *stergo*, which speaks of a *natural love*, such as of parents for their children. But the unsaved are not children of **God**, and therefore this would be inappropriate here. The third word is *phileo*, which refers to a *love called out of one's heart by the pleasure one takes in the object loved*. But **God** takes no pleasure in the wicked, and therefore, this was not a fitting word. The fourth word is *agapao*. This is a *love called out of one's heart by the preciousness of the object loved*. This is the kind of **love** that **John** wished to teach here. The **love** of **YHVH** for the lost was called out of **His** heart by the preciousness of each lost soul, precious because **He** sees in that lost soul **His** own image, though marred by **sin**.<sup>336</sup>

**Jesus** told **Nicodemus** how **God loved the world and gave His only Son** to die for their sins, but **He** also explained that **Nakdimon, a man**, must respond in faith to that message. If **he** would believe, **he** would be **born again**; have **eternal life**, and would qualify for entrance into **the kingdom of God**. At that point in **the** **rabbi's** life, **he** had only been **born of water**. **He** still needed to be **born of the Spirit**.<sup>337</sup> This is one of the many verses in the Gospels that point to the security of the believer (see **Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**). What does **eternal** mean? Could **the Holy Spirit** have used the word temporal here? If you are **born again**, can you be un-**born**? Can we undo what God has already done (see **Bw - What God Does For Us at the Moment of Faith/Trust/Belief**)? These are questions that every believer needs to be able to answer.

Then **the Lord** made this wonderful promise to sinners. **For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.** Then **He** balanced it with a chilling warning to **the Pharisees** and all others who reject **Christ**. **Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:17-18).**

Condemnation for unbelief is not merely relegated to the future. What will be carried out in the final judgment (see my commentary on **Revelation Fo - The Great White Throne Judgment**), has already begun. **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God (Yochanan 3:19-21).** Having hated and rejected **the light**, those whose **deeds** are evil **condemn** themselves to an eternity in **darkness** and apart from **God's love**.

*This is the first real confrontation between Jesus and a Pharisee. He will challenge and deny their fundamental belief in the Oral Law. It will cost the Lord His life.*

This mental struggle for Nakdimon will begin here and continue for three-and-a-half-years. In **John 7:50-51** he is still not a believer. But years later after **Christ's** crucifixion, **Joseph of Arimathea** and **Nicodemus** took the body of Jesus away. They wrapped it with **seventy-five pounds of spices** in accordance with Jewish customs and laid Him in a borrowed tomb (**John 19:38-42**). **Yochanan** identified **Nicodemus** as a believer; however, it would cost him both socially and financially.

In the first century every **rabbi** had to have a trade to earn a living. That's why **Rabbi Sha'ul** was a tent-maker. **Nicodemus** was a well digger. He became very successful and wealthy. **According to rabbinic writings he became among the wealthiest men in all of Jerusalem.** However, when he came to place his faith in **Jesus Christ**, **Nicodemus** was ostracized, reduced to poverty and died a pauper. **The rabbis recorded this true story to show what would happen to anyone accepting Yeshua as the Messiah.** Rest assured, **Nicodemus** died physically poor, but spiritually rich.<sup>338</sup>

As boldly as the center beam of the cross proclaims **God's** holiness, the crossbeam declares **His** love. And, oh, how wide **His** love reaches.

Aren't you glad **John 3:16** does *not* read:

**For God so loved the** rich . . . ?

Or, **For God so loved the** famous . . . ?

Or, **For God so loved the** thin . . . ?

It doesn't. Nor does it state: **For God so loved the** Europeans or the Africans . . . the sober or the successful . . . the young or the brilliant . . .

No, when we examine it, we simply (and gratefully) read: **For God so loved the world.**

How wide is the **love** of **God**? Wide enough for **the** whole **world** and you.<sup>339</sup>

**These same two basic steps hold true today.** ADONAI has done His part. He sent His one and only **Son** to die on the cross as payment for our sins. Have you done your part? Have you accepted the sacrifice of **Jesus the Messiah** and made **Him Lord** of your life? Salvation requires a second **birth from above**, because we are powerless to save ourselves. Moral perfection is the standard and we have all fallen short (**Romans 3:23**); therefore, we cannot become "good enough" to earn our place in heaven. Fortunately, **Yeshua ha-Meshiach** has paid in full the penalty for our **sin**. Rather than try to overcome evil on our own, we must respond to His free gift of **eternal life** with complete trust that **He** can save us (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). If you would like to enter into a relationship with **God** by believing in **Christ** as your **Lord and Savior**, here is a simple prayer you can use to express your faith. But before you do I want you to remember that saying a prayer does not save you, trusting in **Messiah** does.

*Dear Lord,*

*I know that my sin has put a barrier between **You** and me. Thank **You** for sending **Your Son, Jesus**, to suffer the penalty for my **sin** by dying in my place so that the barrier would be removed. I trust in **Yeshua** alone for the forgiveness of my **sins**. In doing that, I also accept His free gift of **eternal life**, which is mine for eternity by **Your** grace.<sup>340</sup>*

*In **Jesus'** name I pray, Amen.*

If you were to die right now, where would you go? That's right, heaven. Why should **God** let you into heaven? Because **Jesus Christ** died to pay for your sins.