

# OpenTheo

## John 3:1 - 3:12



### **Gospel of John** - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg reflects on John chapters 2 and 3, where Jesus performs signs and Nicodemus, a Pharisee of the Jewish ruling council, seeks to understand the meaning of being "born again." Gregg argues that being "born of water" refers to natural birth, while being "born of the Spirit" refers to a new life in Christ. He emphasizes the importance of one's character and reputation, particularly in terms of demonstrating signs from God. Gregg ultimately asserts that the testimony of Jesus about earthly and heavenly things must be trusted, even if they defy human understanding.

### **Transcript**

So we turn to John chapter 3, but we need to get a run up on it where John really intended for us to, at the end of chapter 2, because the chapter division is unfortunate at this particular point. From time to time, those who added the chapter divisions made a mistake, and this is one of those cases, I believe, because chapter 2 contained two segments, two pericopes, as I mentioned yesterday. One of them was the water to wine incident at the wedding feast of Cana.

The other was the first cleansing of the temple, which Jesus did in Jerusalem in the early part of his ministry. That story ended in verse 22 of chapter 2. At chapter 2, verse 23, we really start the new information that includes the story of Nicodemus in chapter 3. So we'll pretend as if the chapter begins in chapter 2, verse 23. It says, Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in his name, when they saw the signs which he did.

But Jesus did not commit himself to them, because he knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for he knew what was in man. Now we're told that while he was there at the Passover, which is when he also had cleansed the temple, so this is the same incident, although that was a week-long festival, and there's a good chance he cleansed the temple at the very beginning of it. So the rest of the week, while he was in Jerusalem there at the Passover festival, he did a number of signs which are not recorded.

John just mentions they saw the signs that he did. And the word sign in John's gospel, the Greek word is *semon*, which is s-e-i-m-i-o-n. I think that's how you pronounce it, or spell it.

Of course it's rather in Greek characters, but that's the transliteration. But *semon*, or sign, refers to a miracle that carries a message. And we've mentioned before that John's gospel doesn't really record very many miracles in any kind of detail.

He alludes to other miracles that Jesus did, but he only really records seven of them, which is much, much less than any of the other gospels do. John's gospel is much less focused on quantity of miracles, and more focused on the quality of the miracles, because John has selected only a few of Jesus' miracles that specifically communicate a message. And as we pointed out in our introduction to John, there are seven miracles, which John refers to as signs.

And there are also seven sayings of Jesus that begin with the words, I am. And it is my contention that each of the miracles corresponds to one of the sayings, although they're not always found in close proximity to each other. Sometimes they are.

When he says, I am the light of the world, he then almost immediately heals a blind man, and gives that man light, who had been in darkness all his life. When he says, I am the bread of life, it's after he has just fed the multitudes with bread and fishes. When he says, I am the resurrection and the life, it's just prior to him raising Lazarus from the dead.

And so these statements, the I am this and the I am that, are statements about who Jesus really is, what his identity and what his mission is. And John, in recording these statements, by the way, the other gospels do not record these I am statements, only John records them. And in recording them, he seems to want to illustrate them from something Jesus did miraculously.

And so we saw when we had him turning water into wine, the first of his miracles in John chapter 2, it actually corresponds with the last of the I am sayings in John, which is in John 15, where he says, I am the true vine. And so a vine is a plant that takes water and eventually transforms it into wine. So Jesus shows himself to be the true vine when he turns water into wine.

If you look at the very end of the book of John, chapter 20, not the very end because there are 21 chapters, but almost the end, John 20 and the end of that chapter. The chapter ends with these words, John 20, verse 30 and 31. John says, truly Jesus did many other signs, the same word, in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

He says, I have deliberately been selective. I have picked and chosen among the many

signs that Jesus did to record a few only. He did many others that I have not chosen to record.

And verse 31, he says, but these are written in the ones that are included have been recorded for you so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. So he specifically says, you know, Jesus did a whole lot of miracles. And in fact, at the end of chapter 21, John says, in verse 25, the last verse of the whole book, he says, and there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

So John says, it would be an overly ambitious enterprise to try to record everything Jesus did. And there's a whole lot more important things, impressive things, signs even that he did besides the ones recorded here. But John, like any historian, but also as an evangelist wanting to preach the gospel, has made his selection of material based on what he thought would illustrate and convince the reader of the claims that Jesus made about himself.

I am this and I am that. And he proved it by the sign that corresponds with that. And so John says, I've recorded these signs and not all the others because these ones are intended to show you who he is and to convince you so that you'll believe and that you'll have life through believing.

So in John 2, 23, we read again of additional signs which are not enumerated. We don't know what they were. We do know from the other gospels that Jesus did a lot of other kinds of miracles and we could enumerate them, but they weren't on this occasion.

Because John is still recording at this point material that is left out of the other gospels. This particular visit to Jerusalem is not found in the other gospels. And in fact, the material of the other gospels which begins Jesus' ministry with his Galilean ministry, John hasn't gotten that far yet.

That begins in chapter 4. That's when the Galilean ministry starts. So all the material in the first three chapters is prior to any of the material of Jesus' ministry that's recorded in the other three gospels, the synoptics. Now, whatever these signs were, we don't know, but they were impressive because many people believed in his name.

Now, to say believed in his name, what does it mean to believe in his name? My name is Steve. Then you believe in my name, right? Well, that's not really what it means. The word name to the Jewish mind conveys much more than just your handle, the moniker by which people call you.

As you may know from stories in the Old Testament, people named their children significant things that had meaning. Usually the child's name had meaning in the context

of the circumstances of his birth. Like Jacob was called heel catcher because he caught his brother.

Esau was named Harry because he was born Harry. Abram was named originally by his dad, Abram, which just means exalted father, but God changed his name to father of a multitude, Abraham, because the meanings of the names were significant. This reflected an awareness on the part of the Jews that a person's name is more than just the syllables by which people address him to get his attention in a crowd.

A person's name tells something about who he is. Now, not anymore. We don't see names that way anymore.

People just name people after a family name or something, a name that they like. In biblical times, a name meant something more like who you really are, not just what people call you. More like we would use the term name in the statement, my good name, like those rumors ruined my good name.

What does my good name mean? My reputation. What is my reputation based on? My character, who I am, what I've proven myself to be. That's my name.

And so that comes close to the way that the biblical writers thought of a name. It was more a person's character, his reputation, what he's all about, who he really is, not just what he is called. And so when it says they believed in his name, this is a common expression in the Bible, to believe in the name of the Lord.

It doesn't mean you believe in the syllables Jesus, or when the Bible even says, call on the name of the Lord. It doesn't always mean just the syllables Jesus, but call on who he really is. Because, by the way, there's many people in the world named Jesus.

In biblical times, it was a fairly common name. It was just the Greek form of Joshua, a popular name at the time. Even today in Mexico, there's people named Jesus, and not many other cultures besides the Hispanics use that name.

But it's a common, it's an ordinary name. To call out Jesus doesn't really mean anything unless you're thinking of the right Jesus, the actual person, who he really is, not just what his name sounds like. A lot of Christians almost use the name Jesus as a superstitious mantra or a formula in their prayers or something like that, without really knowing who it is they're talking to.

And it's more important that they know who he is, what he's like, and so forth, than necessarily how to pronounce his name. There's a lot of people today who say, oh, we need to start calling him by his authentic Hebrew name, Yeshua, because that's really what his disciples called him, and we need to call him by that name. Well, I don't see any particular reason why that would be necessary, but they're placing too much emphasis on the syllables of the name, rather than who the name is referring to.

And so it says they believed in his name because of the signs they saw. It's saying essentially they knew he was someone. And I'm not sure exactly what aspect of his identity they understood.

They might have believed he was the Christ, which would be correct. They might have believed he was the Son of God, which would be correct, although I'm not sure how they would understand that term, since the term Son of God is used a variety of ways in the Bible. Even of us, we're children of God, sons of God.

And so if they believed he was the Son of God, I'm not sure what the exact theological content of that phrase would mean to them. It's unlikely that they had a Trinitarian concept of God the Son, that the Jews didn't have those ideas. That came with the New Testament revelation.

But the point is there were people who came to be convinced that he was the man of the hour. He was the one to be paying attention to. He was the man sent from God because of the signs, and that's exactly what Nicodemus said to him, as we see just looking for just a moment in chapter 3, verse 2. Nicodemus 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.

So these signs convinced people that he was a teacher sent from God. That's at least the aspect of his identity that they grasped. We have to remember that even the disciples who walked with him for three years didn't grasp fully who he was when he stilled the storm, after they'd been with him a long time.

And they heard him command the wind and the waves to stop, and they did. It says the disciples were afraid. And they said to one another, what kind of man is this that even the wind and the waves obey him? What kind of man is this? They didn't know.

Now, if they had fully understood as we do that Jesus is God, we'd be surprised if the wind and the waves didn't obey him. They were surprised that they did, because they didn't know quite. They knew he was a teacher from God, and the disciples particularly were convinced he was the Messiah.

But those concepts did not, to the average Jew, mean God in the flesh. That's something that surprised them to find out later on. So if the disciples themselves didn't fully understand his deity at this point, or even at a much later point, then it's not likely that these people who simply saw miracles believed he was God.

But they believed in his specialness, in the fact that he was from God, that he came with the authority of God. Because the signs he did demonstrated that. And we know, for example, in another gospel, the record of a man who was paralyzed, and his friends lowered him through the roof in front of Jesus, and Jesus said, son, your sins are forgiven

you.

And the Pharisees, who were skeptics, said, what man has authority to forgive sins? Only God can do that. And Jesus said, well, you know, I'll demonstrate to you that I have the authority to forgive sins. He said, what's easier, to say your sins are forgiven you, or arise, take up your bed and walk? So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the man, take up your bed and walk.

So that was a sign that John didn't record, but Jesus specifically said that was a sign to demonstrate that he had authority from God. And that's the thing that I think people were recognizing. But they might not have understood he had authority from God any more than, say, Elijah in the Old Testament had, or Moses, or someone else.

He was clearly a messenger from God, with the authority of God, endorsed by miracles that God did through him. That's what Nicodemus understood. That's no doubt what the other people believed too.

But interestingly, it says in verse 24, Jesus did not commit himself to them. That is, apparently people were ready to, you know, hail him as something special, join his movement. You know, at a later time in John's Gospel, chapter 6, after Jesus fed the multitudes, in John 6, verse 15, it says, when Jesus knew that the crowds were about ready to take him forcibly and make him king, he sent the crowds away and removed himself to a mountain.

He didn't want that. The crowds wanted to make him their king. That perhaps was some of the direction that their sentiments were going, even at this early stage.

Whatever signs they saw were impressive enough. It may be that they were saying, hey, we're behind you, man. You want to drive the Romans out? We're behind you 100%.

He didn't commit himself to their loyalty. He didn't trust them that much. He knew what was in people.

And when it says he didn't commit himself to them because he knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for he knew what was in man. This statement, he knew what was in man, can be taken two very different ways. Some people think it means that he knew what was inside every individual man that he met.

Like he could see right through them and he knew what was going on in there. There are times when Jesus does exhibit that kind of knowledge about a person. He knew the woman at the well.

When he met her, she had five husbands and was living with a man now that wasn't her husband. But she recognized that as a prophetic gift. She said, oh, sir, I see you're a prophet.

And it was. Jesus did the miracles he did through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible says. He operated in the gifts of the Spirit because when he became a man, though he was God, he emptied himself of divine privileges and prerogatives so that he could live in a true condition of humanity with the kinds of handicaps we have.

But like ourselves, he had access to the gifts of the Spirit. Unlike ourselves, he had them all because he was the whole body of Christ. We, on the other hand, are simply members of the body.

We have the gifts, but none of us have all the gifts. Each member has a gift that defines its function as part of the body. So Jesus had all the gifts because he was the whole body of Christ.

But like the body of Christ today, of which Jesus is the head and we are members of his flesh and his bones, it says in Ephesians 5, he operated through the power of the Spirit. And that's why Jesus said at one time, if I'm casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. In Matthew 12, 28, or in Acts 1, 1, where it says Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, gave commandment to his disciples.

Or it says in Hebrews, through the Spirit of holiness, Jesus offered himself up as a sacrifice. Through the Spirit, he did the things he did, just like through the Spirit the apostles did the things they did. They were a continuation of Jesus' activity on earth because they were his body.

And so Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is doing these works. And they testify that he is, of course, from God. And yet, that would suggest that when he knew what was in an individual, it may have been like when Peter knew what was in an individual.

Peter wasn't God, but he had, obviously, a gift. I think we normally would consider that to be the gift of the word of knowledge that Paul lists when he's listing gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. The second gift he mentions is the gift of the word of knowledge.

Usually, it's assumed that that means the ability to kind of know something by personal revelation about someone else that you'd have no natural means of knowing. Jesus knew, for example, that Nathanael had been under the fig tree, and Jesus apparently had never been near the place. That's why Nathanael was so impressed when Jesus said, I saw you under the fig tree.

I mean, it was no big deal if Jesus had walked by the fig tree and saw him there. But when Jesus told the woman that she'd had five husbands and was living with a man who wasn't her husband, she said, oh, I see you're a prophet. That takes a prophetic gift.

That gift Jesus operated in, the apostles sometimes operated in that gift, too. So, in other words, it was not a function of his being God. It was a function of his operating as a son of man through the power of the Holy Spirit and the gifting of the Holy Spirit.

Same as his apostles in the church afterward. The body of Christ has the spirit of Christ and, therefore, can operate through the spirit, the same gifts that Jesus had, though will never be the head. He's always the head of the body, and that makes him preeminent always in the church.

But then if it isn't saying that he knew what was in every individual man, it could be saying he just knew what was in man generally. For example, it doesn't say in verse 25 that he didn't need anyone to testify of a man because he knew what was in a man or every man or an individual. He may have just known that all men are unreliable.

What it's telling us is he did not commit himself to those who seemed to believe in him on this occasion. It sounds like they kind of wanted him to. Here, commit your movement to us.

I'll be your PR guy. I'll take care of your finances. We'll set up an organization here, the Jesus Christ Evangelistic Association.

I'll take care of the fundraising. And Jesus said, you know, I'm not going to commit myself to you guys. My movement is not going to be governed by you.

I have no reason to believe I can rely on you. I know what's in man, unreliability. And either way, it's saying that there were people who wanted to propel him and his movement forward, and he didn't want them to be part of the team of his publicity team and so forth.

So in those verses, we read that which leads to the opening of chapter 3. There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. Now, a ruler of the Jews means he belonged to the body called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of Israel at this time, made up of the elders of Israel.

It was not a body that was established by Moses, and therefore was not something that the law authorized. Although in Moses' day, he had gathered 70 elders together at the tabernacle door, and God had put some of the Spirit that was on Moses upon them, and they prophesied, and they helped Moses to judge the people. And perhaps it was that incident that had led later rabbis in organizing the restored government of Israel after the Babylonian exile to set up a body of governing elders called the Sanhedrin.

And they were the true political and religious authority in Israel at this time under Rome. You see, Rome had conquered the area in 63 BC, and the Jews, long before Jesus was born, had come to be subject to the authority of the Caesar. And the Caesar, knowing that the Jews were more ungovernable than the average race, because they were more rebellious, and that is something that was in fact known to the Romans.

They had watched, they knew enough about the history of these people. All you have to do is read their history in the Old Testament, and you'll know. These people will not be,



they will not behave for very long, even for God.

You know, He'll tell them what to do, they'll kill the prophets, and they'll worship idols anyway. And, you know, these people are ungovernable, they're rebellious, and that's what the Romans knew. So they didn't want to, you know, make the situation too volatile.

And they did have a Roman presence there, but they let the Jews govern their own affairs according to their religious convictions without Roman interference very often. From time to time, Rome had to interfere because the Jews got violent, even with that much favor shown to them. As when, for example, they were going to pull Paul to pieces because someone accused him of having gone into the court of the Jews with a Gentile friend of his, which he had not done, but there was a riot among the Jews, and the Roman authority had to come down and rescue Paul from them.

It was a religious issue, but it became a civil issue when they were about ready to kill the man. And that's one thing the Romans did not permit the Sanhedrin to do. Though they did allow the Sanhedrin to judge cases and prescribe penalties and even carry out penalties, they set the limit at capital punishment.

The Jews were not allowed to condemn a man to death and carry out the execution. For that, they needed Roman approval. And that's, of course, why the Jews went to Pilate with Jesus.

They couldn't kill him without Roman approval, and Pilate was the Roman governor. So the Sanhedrin was the most powerful political body in Israel under the Roman authority, but the Sanhedrin was Jewish authority. In fact, the high priest was the president of the Sanhedrin, and most of the members of the Sanhedrin were in the priesthood.

And not all were. Some of them were Pharisees, but the Pharisees were one party out of several in Israel, like a denomination in Christianity would be. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Herodians, the Zealots, and so forth, were different groups among the Jews with different agendas and different sets of convictions.

The main ones in the Sanhedrin would be the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Actually, the Sadducees were more numerous than Pharisees in the Sanhedrin, because the priesthood tended to be Sadducees instead of Pharisees. Sometimes we think all the enemies of Jesus were the Pharisees.

Actually, the smaller number were the Pharisees. They were just influential disproportionately to their numbers. The Pharisees were respected by the people, although the people didn't like them because they were so snooty and so judgmental, but they did believe the Pharisees at least kept the law better than anyone else, and sure enough, they made a business of keeping the law down to the jot and the tittle, to

the point of tithing even of mint and anise and cumin, and straining a gnat out of their drink so they wouldn't eat an unclean animal.

They were very, very careful about keeping the law, and the Jews who believed that you should keep the law thought, well, no one does it better than them. That's why it must have been so shocking when Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no wise enter the kingdom of God. That's a pretty high bar.

Well, this man was one of those. He was one of the few, relatively few, Pharisees in the Sanhedrin. The rest were Sadducees, and by the way, those two parties were kind of at odds with each other in general over religious issues, like a Baptist and a Pentecostal.

They had different views about things. And the priesthood were mainly Sadducees, partly because the Sadducees tended to be more collaborators with the Romans for political advantage. You get along with the Romans, they'll leave you alone, they'll keep you in power.

If you don't get along with the Romans, they don't like you, they're going to remove you. So the priesthood being powerful politically in Israel tended to be the collaborators more with the Romans, where the Pharisees were more the purists who resented the Roman presence far more, would not cooperate with Rome that much. There were only about 3,000, I think, Pharisees, Josephus said.

That was a pretty small minority of the population. But he did say that they were influential disproportionately to their numbers because they were visible. They were providing, for the most part, the teaching in the synagogues and things like that, so they had great influence over the people.

This man, Nicodemus, was in the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee and a very respected teacher, apparently. Because as we see Jesus says to him in verse 10, just looking ahead here, Jesus answered and said to him, Are you the teacher of Israel? Not a teacher. The King James says, Are you a teacher? In the Greek it says, Are you the teacher of Israel? And you don't know these things.

This man apparently had a reputation of being the teacher of Israel. He was not only in the ruling body of the Supreme Court and a Pharisee, but he also was apparently the teacher par excellence. As in perhaps any religious society, there would be certain people whose gifts in different areas mark them as the one to emulate, the one to become like.

But he must have been, when it comes to teaching the law, he must have set the standard in his own teaching. He was the teacher of Israel. So a very respected man.

And by the way, one that we have reason to believe came to be a believer in Christ,

which was not common among Pharisees or among Sanhedrists. And so this was an important interview. This man came to Jesus by night, verse 2 says, 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.

And Jesus answered and said to him, Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Okay, a couple of things. One or three.

One is that the man came at night. It is generally assumed that he came at night because he wished to be obscure and not be seen. That is possible.

It's also possible that the duties in the Sanhedrin were all day and that it was sundown before he got out and he couldn't come. We don't know. It doesn't say he came at night because he wanted to be secretive.

But the fact that it says it was at night may be indicating that. He chose night as a time to interview Jesus, whereas almost everybody else Jesus talked to was in the daytime. And yet he didn't come on his own behalf merely.

He said, We know that you are a teacher sent from God. Who's we? Certainly he wasn't speaking for all the Pharisees. They didn't for the most part.

He couldn't be speaking for the whole Sanhedrin. They had certainly made no such deliberations among themselves that he was a teacher from God. They were the ones who later condemned him and took him to Pilate and had him crucified.

Actually, over Nicodemus' disapproval, he was in the dissenting minority in that decision. But there was not just him. There was at least one other person, if not several, that he was speaking for.

Perhaps because Jesus had made a big splash by cleansing the temple, he had become the talk of the religious leaders, some of them probably very much antagonistic toward him and some thinking, Well, I wonder, you know. He is kind of right. This is the Father's house.

Perhaps it's not supposed to be a house of merchandise. This is the kind of thing prophets in the Old Testament did. They wouldn't say Old Testament, of course.

But in the Tanakh, the prophets used to do this kind of thing. Maybe this is a prophet. And then when they heard of miracles being done by him and saw them, no doubt this was the talk of the leadership.

All that week, as they gathered in the temple to just talk about important things, Jesus had become an important item, partly by driving the money changers out of the temple to cause a big commotion, and then working miracles and having a lot of people believe

in him. Apparently, there were some among the leaders who felt that Jesus is a teacher sent from God, that these signs were convincing enough. We have reason to believe Joseph of Arimathea was among that group.

At least later he was. He was also a Pharisee and also in the Sanhedrin and also a supporter of Jesus. It was Joseph of Arimathea who, along with Nicodemus, later got the body of Jesus, which was now dead, and buried it, gave him an honorable burial in a tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea.

These two men were both of this leadership group. And probably, Nicodemus was speaking at least for Joseph as well, and there might have been others. There might have been a small minority within the leadership of Israel who at least were open-minded and thinking, well, Jesus clearly claims to be something special, and there are miracles backing up.

Maybe we should look into this. It would appear, the way Nicodemus speaks, that he was perhaps coming as the spokesman for a small group of people. He says, well, we know you're sent from God.

But why come then? Well, probably to find out more information about Him. And the information that was on his mind, I believe, can be deduced by what Jesus said to him. Because the man asked no question.

He just said, we know you're a teacher sent from God. No one could do these signs that you do unless God was with them. And Jesus says, most assuredly I say to you, unless some person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Well, who would say anything about that? Who would say anything about the kingdom of God? Jesus anticipated it. Everyone was thinking about the kingdom of God in those days. Because Daniel had said that in the days of the Roman Empire, the God of heaven would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed.

And the Jews had come to understand that the Messiah would be the king of that kingdom. And they were always looking for the coming of the kingdom of God. And before this happened, John the Baptist had appeared on the scene saying, the kingdom of God is at hand.

And all of Judea had gone out to him, including Pharisees. In chapter 1 of John, we read that there was a group of Pharisees that were sent from Jerusalem to go and ask John, who are you? Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you that prophet? John denied all those things. But you see, John had elevated the awareness of the people that the kingdom of God is supposed to be coming soon according to this guy.

And then Jesus shows up. So obviously the question in people's minds, at least many, is, well, John said he wasn't the Messiah. Maybe this is the Messiah.

Maybe this is the guy who's bringing in the kingdom of God. That had to be on their mind. And that would be the only reason why Jesus would bring this up without being asked.

He knew what was in the man. And what was in the man was curiosity. Are you the Messiah? Are you bringing us the kingdom of God? And so Jesus answers the question that the man has not asked and says, he doesn't give a straight answer.

He seldom does. But he says, most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. If the question on Nicodemus and his friend's minds was, I wonder if we're about ready to see the kingdom of God.

And that could be the way they were phrasing it among themselves. Because we hear the Pharisees saying something very much like that in Luke 17 and verse 20. There it says, the Pharisees demanded of Jesus when the kingdom of God would appear.

And on that occasion, Jesus' answer was the kingdom of God will not come with observation. You won't be able to say, lo, there it is, or lo, here it is. He said the kingdom of God is already in your midst.

It's already here. You just can't see it. It's not coming the way you think.

You can't see it with your normal eyes. But it was the Pharisees who asked him, demanded when the kingdom of God will appear in Luke 17 and 20. And Jesus' answer was essentially, you can't see it.

And that's what he said to Nicodemus. You can't see it without being born again. Unless you're born again, you can't see this.

This is something that is spiritual. Now that's not what the Jews expected. They didn't expect a spiritual kingdom.

They expected a Davidic replay. They believed that the Messiah would be another David. David had not been a, well, he had been a spiritual man.

He was a man filled with the Spirit and he wrote Psalms and stuff like that and led worship. He was spiritual, but he was not leading a spiritual kingdom. He led a political kingdom.

Israel was a political kingdom. It had political boundaries, political enemies, political machinery. It had a throne to occupy.

It had an army. It was a political empire, kingdom. And David came to the power and he caused Israel to become the most successful kingdom in that region so that all the surrounding nations paid tribute to Israel and it was the glory days of Israel, which they never forgot after David was gone because it was never repeated.

David was the greatest of their kings and the prophets after him would always say, the Messiah is going to come as the seed of David. And sometimes they spoke of him as being another David. In Ezekiel chapter 37, in Hosea chapter 3, the Messiah is even called David because David was the closest thing they could liken the Messiah to.

He's going to bring back the glory of Israel. But to the Jewish mind, the glory of Israel meant the Gentiles are going to have to recognize Israel is the big boy on the block and they're going to have to show some respect for a change to us Jews and they're going to eventually recognize our king can whip their butts and he's going to put them under tribute. That's what the Jews thought.

That he's going to come and he's going to, you know, drive out the Romans, not drive out the people out of the temple, not the Jews, he's going to drive the Romans out and reestablish a David-like empire. That's what they all longed for. But if that would happen, everyone could see it.

And that's why Jesus said, it's not going to come observably like you think. It's already here in your midst and you don't see it. It's not a political thing that's happening.

And he has to correct Nicodemus' wrong views here. You won't see it unless you're born again. Now, Nicodemus must have thought that was an amazing thing because he was probably of very pure Jewish birth.

Having risen to such a position of respect, generally speaking, having a perfect Jewish pedigree was something almost required if you're going to be highly respectable in society. And, you know, one could hardly hope to have a higher and better birth than Nicodemus had had. The Jews thought that being born Jewish, with pure Jewish blood, a pure seed of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, that's what it took to be the kingdom of God.

You had to have the right bloodline and the right status in birth, which was basically Jewish. And if you had that, you're in. Israel, as far as they were concerned, is the kingdom of God.

And when the kingdom is restored in the Messiah, if you're in Israel, you're in it. And very few people probably had a better pedigree than this Nicodemus had. And Jesus said, well, you're going to be born again if you're going to see it.

And Nicodemus must have felt very strange about that. You know, well, how can you have a better birth than the one I already had? How could one be more qualified than I am by birth to seek and enter a kingdom? And he said, how can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Now, I've been reading the Bible all my life, and as a child, I was familiar with this story, of course. It's famous.

And I remember reading it many times in my youth and thinking, this doesn't seem real.

No one would ask such a stupid question as that. When you mention being born again, no one's going to say, oh, you mean go back into the womb and be born again? That's just not realistic.

And then when I started witnessing to people and talking about being born again, I heard them ask that question many times. Not in mockery, but just in, you know, incredulity. Like, what do you mean be born again? You can't go into a womb and be born again.

They literally thought that. Of course, now the term became much more popularized, especially when Chuck Colson was born again and wrote a book of his testimony called Born Again. That got a lot of publicity.

And then people like us became called born-again. People who aren't Christians, they speak about evangelicals as born-again. That just became a popular term now.

So I'm sure that now you wouldn't hear this kind of response as much. But back before the term was well-known outside of Christianity, you'd talk to an unbeliever. It was very common for someone to ask this very question.

So this dialogue is very realistic. It's easy to believe it really happened. That's what many people used to think when they'd hear the term born again.

And by the way, you probably have seen the bumper stickers. People say I was born right the first time, you know, and basically saying I don't need to be born again because my first birth was, you know, fine. Obviously a sarcastic and sacrilegious slur on what Jesus said.

I don't need to be born again. Well, maybe they won't be. Then they'll find out if they were born good enough the first time.

I don't think so. Nicodemus wasn't. And he was about as good as they get in Israel.

And Israel were the chosen people. So, I mean, there wasn't really anyone better than Nicodemus to feel qualified. He was well-born.

He was well-respected. He was in the Supreme Court. He had political power.

He was religiously respected. He was a better teacher than anybody else of the Word of God. He had a career in it.

He was a servant of God. How come he wasn't good enough? And if he wasn't, who could be? And he said, are you talking about going into a womb and being born again? How could this happen? And Jesus answered, Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Now, this statement, obviously, is parallel to verse 3, but not verbatim the same.

In verse 3, he says you have to be born again. In verse 5, he says you have to be born of water and the Spirit. And in verse 3, he says you cannot see the kingdom.

In verse 5, he says you cannot enter the kingdom. But even though the words are different, he's still talking about the same phenomenon. Becoming aware of the kingdom of God and entering it requires an additional birth.

Now, he said you must be born of water and of the Spirit. And this phrase has been interpreted variously. I never really encountered the interpretation that sees this as a reference to water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism until I actually, when I was much younger, in a conversation with Mormons, found out that they believed, since they believed you have to be baptized in water and you have to be baptized in the Holy Spirit to be saved, they used this verse.

And I was conversing with them. I was surprised that they could take it that way. I thought, it doesn't say anything about baptism.

It says you have to be born of water and born of the Spirit. And they said, well, that means baptized in water and baptized in the Spirit. I thought, boy, are those Mormons out to lunch.

And then I found out it's a major view among theologians, Christian theologians. Many theologians believe that Jesus is talking about baptism here. That he's saying you have to be baptized in water and you have to be baptized in the Holy Spirit in order to be saved, to enter the kingdom.

Well, if that's true, then a person who's not water baptized obviously cannot hope to be in the kingdom. And then the Church of Christ people are correct that water baptism is essential for salvation. That's a view of the Church of Christ and also of a number of other groups.

I don't believe the Bible indicates that that's true. Certainly baptism is important, but I don't see Jesus bringing that up here. I don't see anything in Jesus' words that would communicate the idea of baptism.

Maybe the word water, because you baptize in water, but you also drink water and you also bathe in water and you also do a lot of other things with water. You water your garden with water. Just the mention of water doesn't necessarily convey the idea of baptism.

He doesn't say anything about being baptized in water. He says being born of water. Now, I suppose baptism can be seen as a metaphor of birth or in our case of rebirth because we die and we're buried with Christ in baptism and we rise to the newness of life out of the water.



That's like coming to life from the dead. That's what regeneration, that's what rebirth really is. And so for us, after the resurrection of Christ, we are actually instructed to see our baptism as kind of a birth in a sense.

I mean, at least an emblem of a new life, of burying the past and rising to a new life. Although the word birth isn't used in the epistles about that experience, yet the idea of a new life could be the idea of a birth. But they wouldn't have had that association in Jesus' day.

That comes up after the resurrection of Christ. We're buried with him in baptism and raised with him. Only after the resurrection could that idea be associated with baptism.

John the Baptist was the one who was baptizing at this time and he didn't say anything about being born again. He didn't say you're coming into a new life. He said his baptism was just a baptism of confession of sin and of repentance.

It perhaps had the idea associated with washing a person clean, as many of the Jewish washings had that notion associated with. But the idea of rebirth was not suggested in anything John preached or did. So I just don't see how anyone could think that Nicodemus would take from this statement the idea of baptism.

And he doesn't say anything about baptism. Jesus didn't say anything about baptism. So this idea that being born of water and born of the Spirit means being baptized in water and baptized in the Spirit sounds to me like, I don't know, a doctrine of convenience brought up by someone who wanted to advocate the necessity of water baptism.

But it doesn't sound like an exegetical idea to draw from what Jesus actually said. It certainly doesn't seem to be what Nicodemus took from it. And I don't blame him.

I can't see why he would. So I don't believe that Jesus is referring to baptism in water here or baptism in the Spirit, though I believe in both. I just don't think that's what he's talking about.

But what is he talking about then? Well, there's a couple of suggestions that make some sense to me, better sense than that one. Two other options exist. One is that baptism in water and in the Spirit is one way of thinking about being born again.

The second birth is a birth of water and of the Spirit. In other words, he's talking about one additional birth that you need, which is of water and Spirit. Now what would that convey? Jesus expected the Teacher of Israel to know these things.

So this would have to come from something in the Old Testament. Well, there is a possibility that Jesus was alluding to something in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 36, there is a passage that is recognized by Christians.

All Christian theologians pretty much recognize it's about the new birth and the new covenant. And it describes it in these terms, in verse 25 through 27. God says, Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean.

I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you. I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

I will put My Spirit in you, and cause you to walk in My statutes. Now here, God is speaking to the prophet of what he will do when the Messiah comes and establishes a new covenant. In the new covenant, God will cleanse them as with sprinkling water.

He will give them a new heart. Take out the heart of stone and put in a heart of flesh. Essentially a new life.

And put His Spirit in them. This could be thought of as a new birth. It's a regeneration.

It's a change of heart. It's like a new life altogether. And it may be, although the word birth is not used here, that this is what Jesus expected to be understood to be talking about.

Because this could be called a birth of water and spirit, since it uses the term, I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and I'll put My Spirit in you. Both of these would be aspects of the new birth. That there's a cleansing as with the sprinkling of water.

It's a figure of speech. It's not talking about the literal baptism of water. It is talking more about the concept that the Jews had, that you sprinkle things, sacred things, to make them holy.

And almost like the, you know, a little bit like what the Catholics do, sprinkling holy water and things. There was a sprinkling of blood and a sprinkling of water in some of the ceremonies that the Jews had. And the idea that I will sprinkle water upon you and make you clean is a reference to forgiving sins, justification, and then I'll put My Spirit in you.

Now, that would be something perhaps that Paul is alluding to in Titus 3, I believe it is. I'll tell you if I'm right in a moment here. Yeah.

Titus 3, verse 5. Picking up Paul mid-sentence, as is sometimes necessary to do since his sentences run many verses long, including this one. But in the midst of the sentence, in verse 5, he says, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us through the washing of regeneration. Not of baptism, but of regeneration.

That's the changed heart. The new heart is what regeneration is talking about. The washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.

See, there's water and the Spirit. We were saved through being regenerated, likened to washing. Perhaps because of Ezekiel 36, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you'll be clean, and I'll put My Spirit in you, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Cleansing from sin and renewing of the life by giving a new spirit and a new heart. Paul speaks of being saved in that manner. That could be Paul's way of alluding to being born of water and of the Spirit.

And also alluding, of course, to the Ezekiel passage. So, this is a reasonable interpretation, I think, of Jesus' words. It's not the only reasonable one.

I have another one I want to give you. But certainly one way of looking at this in John 3, 5, is that Jesus says, Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born one more time, which is a birth of water and the Spirit, as Ezekiel alluded to, a regeneration, a new heart being given to you, a cleansing as of water and a giving to you of the Holy Spirit, so that you are, as Paul put it, the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit. These are the aspects of the new birth.

Don't you think that's a pretty good interpretation of this? I think it makes a lot of sense. It's not the one I hold, but I think it's a good one. The third possibility is the one that I personally favor, although I'm not sure that I'm right, because the one I just gave you is pretty good.

But the reason I favor a third option is because of what Jesus said after death. Because he was not finished speaking in verse 5. He went on to verse 6, where he said, That which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Now notice verses 5 and 6 in juxtaposition.

Both of them speak of two things. The first one is born of water and born of the Spirit. The second one is born of the flesh and born of the Spirit.

There's a contrast there. In both cases, there is a birth of the Spirit, but it's contrasted with something else. A birth in water or in the flesh.

If born of the flesh is parallel, in Jesus' mind, with born of water, then born of water just means natural birth. Now, why would anyone speak of that as born of water? Well, anyone who's had a baby knows. You young single guys may not know.

Not many of you here. But, of course, a baby is born amidst the breaking of waters. Waters precede the birth.

The waters are the signal that the birth is imminent. A person who is born the first time is born, we could say, through water or up water. And that would appear in the structure of verses 5 and 6 taken together to be parallel to being born of the flesh.

Now, there's no ambiguity in the word born of the flesh. Born of the flesh means born a baby the first time. Physically.

Physically born. And so it looks to me like Jesus is comparing or contrasting two kinds of birth in both verses. In the first of these two verses, verse 5, he uses the expression to contrast them, born of water and of the Spirit.

In the second, he uses the contrast, born of flesh and of the Spirit. And that's what makes me think born of water just means natural birth. And he'd be saying, then, it's not enough that you've been born once.

Everyone's been born once. And it doesn't matter what your pedigree is, or what your parentage is, or what your race is, because if you're just talking about being born of the flesh, you're just flesh. The kingdom of God, though, is a spiritual kingdom.

And you cannot enter the kingdom unless you are spiritual. You have to be born of the Spirit as well as being born of the flesh. Now, I have no emotional attachment to this third option.

It's just what I have been convinced of. If you happen to think the second option, or even the first one, makes more sense, you're welcome to it. The main point is that he is saying there's an additional birth, a supernatural birth that is spiritual, which if a person does not have, they will not see or enter the kingdom of God.

The fact that they can't see it suggests that it's only perceived spiritually. You remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2.14. He said, The natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him because they are spiritually discerned. Spiritual things have to be discerned by spiritual people.

Natural men can't see them, can't discern them. And so, if the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, then it cannot be discerned by natural men. One must be a spiritual man to discern spiritual things, and you must be born of the Spirit.

So, that is certainly what Jesus is saying, regardless of what he means by born of water. Because you could take the second or the third option there, and it would still be the same idea. The idea is that you've been born once already, you need to be born again.

And that needs to be a spiritual birth, a born of the Spirit. In verse 7 he says, Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. Why would you be surprised about that? You should be aware that your ancestors, Israel, they had a perfect pedigree in many cases, but they had a very imperfect history in that they turned from God again and again and again.

Being born Jewish was not enough to make a man loyal to God. There must be something different required, a different kind of heart, a removal of the heart of stone,

the insertion of a heart of flesh, the writing of God's laws on the heart instead of on stone tablets imposed on the outward behavior. There has to be a change inwardly, it has to be a spiritual thing.

That's why God said, I will give you, I'll put my Spirit within you and make you walk in my ways. In other words, I'll change your orientation from being a rebel to being a son, an obedient son. You'll have to be born of me to be my son.

I'll give you my Spirit, and that's a spiritual thing. Jesus thought that Nicodemus should have put two and two together and come up with that. Jesus said in verse 8, The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes.

So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. Now, the word wind in the Greek is the same as the word Spirit. The same is true in the Old Testament Hebrew.

In the Old Testament, the word is ruach. It means Spirit or wind or breath. It can be translated any of those ways depending on the demands of the context.

The word pneuma or pneuma has a silent P at the beginning. That's the Greek word here. And it's just like the word ruach.

It can be breath. It can be Spirit. It can be wind.

Our translators here have translated the wind blows where it wishes. Some people prefer the Spirit blows where it wishes. But I think wind is better because Jesus is giving an illustration at the end of which he says, So are those who are born of the Spirit.

There is something in nature that resembles something in the Spirit. That which is in nature is the wind. He said the wind, it's not under your control.

It blows freely around wherever it wants to. You can't control the wind. Donovan sang a whole song about that.

Might as well try and catch the wind. You can't do that. It's going to go where it wants to go.

And he says you hear the sound of it, but you cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. Now, he says, So are those who are born of the Spirit. Some people say that means that when people are born of the Spirit you can't tell where they came from or where they're going.

And that's because that's how it is. Like the wind. But I don't think that's the comparison.

What I think he's saying is the wind is a mysterious force. It kind of acts without your permission. It goes where it wants to go.

You don't really understand it at all. You don't know where it begins, where it ends. It's a mystery to you.

It's even invisible to you. Although you can see and hear its effects. So also this phenomenon of being born of the Spirit.

He says you can't hope to understand it. You might as well try and catch the wind. And so the wind is something invisible.

But of course you believe in it. You don't see it, but you see the effects it has on the trees and everything else. And you feel it on your face and hear it howl.

You know it's there. Not because you see it, but because you see what it does. And so also the moving of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

You can't see the Spirit. The Kingdom of God doesn't come with observation. You can't say, Lo, hear, Lord.

It's within you. It's among you. It's something that is spiritual.

You can tell that it's come, though, because just like the wind, which affects things in ways that you can see and hear, so one who is born of the Spirit, the Spirit affects people in ways that you can see and hear. There's tangible evidence of the reality of being born of the Spirit, though it's mysterious, like the wind is mysterious. I think that's what he's saying.

Verse 9, Nicodemus speaks again after so long a time. And this is the last time we hear him speak in this episode. He's not doing much of the talking, but he's doing some questioning.

And Jesus then answers the questions. Nicodemus answered and said to him, How can these things be? Now, it's not clear whether this is a rhetorical question saying this can't be. Sometimes you say, How can this be? You're not really asking for an answer.

You're basically, it's a rhetorical question, you know, emphatically saying this is impossible. But Jesus answers him as if it's a true question, and maybe it was. How can someone be born again then? How can it be that someone experiences rebirth? And Jesus answered and said to him, Are you the teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, we speak what we know and testify what we have seen and you do not receive our witness.

Now, who is we? Some people might think it's Jesus and the Holy Spirit or Jesus and the Father, but in all likelihood, he means himself and John the Baptist. He talks about we testify to what we have seen and what we know. If you look back two chapters, we have John the Baptist speaking and he said in verse 33 of Jesus, I did not know him, but he

who sent me to baptize with water said to me, upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, this is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.

Now John has said, I've seen, I know, and I testify, I bear witness. And that's what Jesus says, we bear witness to what we have seen and what we know. John bore witness to what he saw and what he knew and Jesus bore witness to what he saw and what he knew.

And I think he's saying, you've heard of John and now you've heard of me and we're both talking about things we know about. We've seen what you haven't seen. We know things you don't know and we're bearing witness to them so it's just for you to decide whether you believe our witness or not.

And he says, you don't receive our witness. Now, I don't know if you, it's plural, I don't know if he means Nicodemus and his friends or you Jews in general. I don't know if Jesus is making a statement about Israel as a whole which might allow a few, like Nicodemus, to be exceptions to.

Or whether he's implicating Nicodemus himself and people who are maybe in a shallow way showing interest in him. He said, if I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? And this is not, it's not obvious what he means by this but he might be saying, I've just told you something for which I can give an earthly analogy. Birth is an earthly analogy for what I'm talking about.

The wind is in some sense an earthly analogy. These are earthly things, I can, if I'm telling you things that I can give earthly analogies for, what, that you don't understand still, what if I want to talk about things that there is no earthly analogy for? What kinds of things might there not be an earthly analogy for? I sometimes think maybe the Trinity is one of those things. I'm not sure, I don't think he's necessarily referring to that but there were mysteries yet to come for which no earthly analogy could be found.

And every time teachers try to give an earthly analogy, including me, it's very evident of the inadequacy of the analogy because the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the way that they are persons and one God and so forth, there's just no explanation given in the Bible, never likened to anything earthly. It's teachers who are not satisfied with the mystery and have to try to come up with analogies. But there are mysteries, there are things for which no analogy can be found of earthly things.

He said, you're having trouble with the things that I can illustrate from earthly examples. What are you going to do if I go beyond that? You're going to be in bad shape. He says in verse 13, no one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven, that is the Son of Man.

And in the New King James, and the King James says, who is in heaven? That's an awkward phrase to have there and it is absent from the Alexandrian text. So if you have a translation other than the King James or the New King James, it probably doesn't have that last clause, who is in heaven? And that may be because it doesn't belong there or it might be that the people who came up with the Alexandrian text found it as difficult as I do and thought, let's just leave that out. Why is it difficult? Because Jesus is speaking in this place on earth.

And He speaks of Himself. And He speaks of Himself as one who is in heaven. Now of course, if verse 13 is not Jesus speaking, but is a parenthesis of the author inserting a comment, which is not unheard of.

From time to time, there's a quotation of Jesus speaking and then the author gives a little commentary. I realize that in our Bible, verse 13 is within the quotation marks as if Jesus is still speaking, but there are no quotation marks in the Greek. The Greek doesn't have any punctuation and therefore the punctuation in your Bible is the translator's best guess.

And the translators apparently have kept the conversation going with Jesus speaking all the way up through verse 21. I don't think that Jesus was speaking all the way through verse 21. No one knows for sure because there are no quotation marks in the Greek.

But I think Jesus stopped at some place prior to that. I think He probably stopped no later than verse 15. But possibly even at verse 12.

If verse 12 is the close of Jesus' remarks, where He ends a little bit scolding Nicodemus for being dull. And we don't have any further quotation from Jesus at this point. And then John does what he often does and goes off and gives his own commentary.

Then John might be saying in verse 13, No one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven. That is the Son of Man who is in heaven. At the time John is writing, Jesus has gone back to heaven.

Of course, John didn't write this book until long after the ascension. So he could be making a comment like this. That Jesus, the one I'm telling you about, is now in heaven.

And that would solve the problem somewhat. There is really nothing else after verse 12 that would have to be said by Jesus in this setting. It all could be the author.

So that's a possibility. Another possibility is that Jesus is still speaking and that last clause was not originally there. Because the Alexandrian text leaves it out.

It just ends verse 13 with except the Son of Man. Period. Of course, if that's how the original ended, one has to come up with a theory about how this last clause got added when it's so awkward.



In many cases where there's a textual difference, the more awkward reading is probably the authentic one. Because no one would take an easier reading and make it more awkward. But someone might take an awkward reading and make it more easy.

So in many cases, if you've got two readings and one is strange and one is not strange, as much as we'd like to go with one that's not strange, we would have to explain, well then how is it that if it was originally not strange, who was crazy enough to add this strange part to it when it didn't need it, didn't improve it? And so this is an unsolved mystery about this. Many times textual questions cannot be resolved because there's people who favor this or that text. And all I can say is if John was making his commentary, there's not a problem with it.

So maybe the quotation from Jesus ends at verse 12. But John goes on. But if he does, we're going to have to take what he says on another occasion because it's gotten too late for us to continue.

So we'll stop here at verse 12. And when we come back, we will proceed as if we're reading John's commentary on all this.