

That You May Continue to Believe...



AN Exposition of the gospel of John

You Must Be Born Again John 3:1-21

I remember when I was a teenager there was a popular sports radio program put on by a man named Gordon McClendon. He hit upon a really novel idea. He decided to match the greatest heavyweight boxers of all times against each other in imaginary bouts. Since he was a professional sports announcer, he sat down at a microphone in a studio and with a host of sound effects played like some of the great boxers of all times were fighting against each other and he was calling the fight. There was Gentlemen Jim Corbett, Jack Johnson, Joe Lewis, Rocky Marciano, Floyd Patterson and Muhammad Ali. Of course, none of these fighters fought at the same time and by the time the radio program came out many of them had long since been dead but that didn't stop Gordon McClendon. He just acted like everybody existed at the same time and that everybody was in their prime and he called the fight that the experts thought might have happened if they could have really fought. I loved that program. I listened intently each week to see if the old timers were going to beat the new timers, to see if my favorite would win. It was sort of a modern twist on **"My father can beat your father at dominoes."**

There is, and I say this reverently, some of that sort of thing going on here in John. Of course, the analysis that is being presented is not based on sentimentalism or personalities. The analysis being presented by John the Beloved is based, instead, on revealed truth and on the testimony of eyewitnesses. Now what we have seen thus far is the repetition of evidence proving the superiority of Jesus. We saw that, early on, when John the Baptist testified emphatically that he was not the Messiah or the prophet or Elijah. On the other hand, seven witnesses were called including John the Baptist who testified emphatically that Jesus was, in fact, **the** Messiah and **the** prophet prophesied by Moses. But they testified to even more than that. The witnesses presented by John the Beloved set forth their own eyewitness testimony that Jesus was the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world. They testified further that Jesus was the very Son of God. Their testimony was truthful and impartial up to a point. I mean think about it. Once a person has come to the realization of the truth that Jesus is the Lamb of God, how could you expect such a witness to be impartial, especially when it is their sins that have been forgiven? Still the inherent superiority of Jesus comes shining through and that superiority was not just in comparison to John the Baptist. Jesus showed Himself to be, in the sign that He worked at Cana, the one that would fulfill the Law of God and then give out the promised joy of salvation. No prophet, no teacher, no king had ever been able to promise such a thing. He presented Himself in the cleansing of the temple to be the one true temple where God and man could meet in reconciliation. He showed Himself to be the true tabernacle, the true holy place where God could commune with men. Not even Moses or David could have ever done that.

Jesus also showed Himself to possess the wisdom of God in such a manner and to such a degree that it would have made even the extraordinary Solomon flush in ignorance. He showed some of that in chapter one with Nathanael. But He also showed His wisdom at the end of chapter two. You see He showed Himself there to know something of the unbelief that surrounded Him. He knew better than to entrust Himself to unbelieving men; He knew when faith was genuine and He knew when it was not.

Nowhere, is that more evident than in the story of Nicodemus¹. But before we go through the text, I want to remind you of the initial premise under which we are working through John.

I set before you, early on, the idea that John was written to encourage Jewish Christians who were under pressure to forsake Jesus in favor of the synagogue. It was written to encourage them to stick with Jesus, to remain faithful to Him and to Him only. The way John encourages those early Jewish Christians is by reminding them through selected stories and miracles or signs just how glorious Jesus was and is.

In the encounter with Nicodemus, we are going to see Jesus try to enlighten one of the leading teachers of the nation on the necessity and nature of spiritual birth². I want you to think about that from the perspective of a first century Jewish believer. Here's the idea. John is basically asking the question, **"Now why would you want to go back to the synagogue? Don't you know that the wisdom of the best teachers the nation had to offer pale in comparison to the spiritual wisdom and insight of Jesus? Don't you see that Nicodemus could not keep up with the spiritual insight of Jesus even when Jesus was on page**

one? Jesus was the wisdom of God come down from heaven. The synagogue leaders, even the best and brightest teachers of the nation, evaporated before the wisdom of Jesus like dew before a noonday sun. Why would you want to go back to that?"

Now, that having been said, let's dig into the text together.

^{ESV} **John 3:1**...Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

The first thing I think you ought to notice about John 3:1 is the repetition of the word "**man.**" It made up part of an important idea at the end of chapter 2. Let's look back there for a minute.

^{ESV} **John 2:24**...But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Now do you see the connection between those two things? John tells us that Jesus did not entrust himself to any man because He knew what was in man. Then starting in chapter 3, John tells us "**there was this man.**" Now, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to guess what is going to happen. Jesus is going to see through this man that comes to see Him. He is going to discern what is in this man's heart and He is going to cut through to the real issue so fast it going to makes this man's head swim.

But before we get to that let's look and see what we can learn about this man Nicodemus. The first thing you ought to notice is that he was a Pharisee³. The

Pharisees were the popular religious party of their day. They were the religious party of the people⁴. They were not, however, the religious party of power. That was the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection for the just and a place of eternal punishment for the wicked. They believed in angels and spirits and they were careful keepers of the law⁵. They were ascetic; that is, they were extremely disciplined. Still, they were known for their generosity especially in contrast to the Sadducees.

At any rate, John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee but he was not just any Pharisee. He was a member of the Sanhedrin⁶. John uses the phrase Jewish ruling council but he clearly meant what we have come to know as the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus, then, would have been one of the seventy-one premier leaders of the nation. The Sanhedrin was a combination of Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes. In one sense, they were like our congress or legislative branch in that they made decisions about the law. On the other hand they were somewhat like the judicial branch of our government in that they conducted trials. Of course, they were like the executive branch of our government in that they carried out punishments.

The Jewish tractate *Sanhedrin 18a and 24b* says that the Sanhedrin lost the right or power to inflict capital punishment 40 years before the destruction of the Temple⁷. But I think that may be an approximate date. If it is not, then they executed James in the book of Acts illegally or there may have been a different arrangement with the Romans simply because Herod Agrippa had been appointed King. At any rate, here's what we can be sure of. Nicodemus was an expert at the law. He was a recognized and appointed leader of the nation with the legal status of an expert in the law.

Now let's look at verse 2 and see how the episode with Nicodemus develops.

^{ESV} **John 3:2**...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."

The first thing, I think you ought to notice is the phrase, "he came by night." There are many different interpretations regarding his coming by night. The first and I think the mostly widely held is that Nicodemus came to see Jesus under cover of night because of his fear. That certainly is a possibility and I think it might be bolstered by his being linked to Joseph of Arimathea in John 19.

^{ESV} **John 19:38**...After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.

So, it is possible that he may have come by night because of fear. He may have come by night because he wanted to have uninterrupted time with Jesus. He may have come at night because of weight of his daily duty as a member of the Sanhedrin. Or his coming at night may have been related by John for its metaphorical value in which Nicodemus is shown to be one coming out of darkness to light. I think that the best clue to the meaning of night is how it is used elsewhere in John⁸. Certainly the other use that comes to mind is...

^{ESV} **John 13:30**...So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

That makes me think John's use is pejorative. That is it makes me think Nicodemus is either fearful or is in his own spiritual darkness. I really like what

D.A. Carson said in his commentary, **“Nicodemus approached Jesus at night but his night was darker than he knew.”** Still it may be wrong to make too much of it. Whatever his reason for coming at night, Nicodemus is very polite to Jesus.

He addresses with an extremely complimentary title. Now this title had been given to Jesus earlier by the two disciples and by Nathanael but here it has real significance because it comes from the lips of one of the premier teachers of the nation.

Now notice what he says to Jesus...

^{ESV} **John 3:2...**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."

Now, I don't think there is any doubt that Nicodemus is engaging in some measure of pretentiousness. He is trying to set Jesus at ease by assuring Him that he recognizes at least some validity to His ministry. You have to remember this is the educated, certified theological expert condescending to speak politely to an uneducated peasant. In particular, I want you to notice that phrase, “we know.” Now I think that means that he is speaking, at least as far as he is concerned, on behalf of the Sanhedrin and what he is saying seems to be something like this, **“Teacher, we can't always tell when the real thing comes along...but we know that you are the real thing because of the signs which you have done** (perfect tense here indicates a completed action in the past with results in the present).”

Now, if I don't get anything else across to you this morning I want you to get the absolute surgical precision with which Jesus cuts through the veneer of Nicodemus' politeness. His answer is so abrupt, so emphatic, so to the point it's like a laser. He doesn't say, **"Why Master Nicodemus, I am so glad that you recognize the origin of my power and the validity of my ministry."** He doesn't say, **"You know it is so wonderful to actually get to sit and talk to somebody that gets it."** Instead, what he does is something like this, **"You know a lot do you? Here's something you might not know?"**

^{ESV} **John 3:3**...Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

I want you to get a sense of how radically disruptive this statement was to the whole approach Nicodemus had intended to take. What is implied in Nicodemus statement is something like this, **"Alright, you've done some miracles. You have done some signs. Clearly, you have some power. Why should we believe you are something more? Why don't you show me what you got?"**

What Jesus answers is something like this, **"Nicodemus, you are wondering if I am Him. What would you think if I told I was but that you weren't ready for me? You see Nicodemus, as things stand, you don't have the spiritual ability to even recognize the kingdom of God when it is right in front of your face. You see I know what you got?"**

Now Nicodemus's response is hard to judge. It may be that he was trying to keep up with Jesus by scornfully responding to His statement in such a clever fashion. It may be that he was genuinely baffled by what Jesus had said⁹. Clearly, he casts

his response in terms of physical birth and hence understands Jesus remark as completely literal.

^{ESV} **John 3:4**...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?"

Now in order to understand Nicodemus' response you have to know something about the word Jesus used. In Greek the word is pronounced ἄνωθεν...ah-know-thin. It can mean again like "a second time" or it can mean "from above."

When it is used in Galatians 4, it means "all over again."

^{ESV} **Galatians 4:9**...But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

But the two other places in John where it is used it clearly means "from above."

^{ESV} **John 19:11**...Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

^{ESV} **John 19:23**...(Joh 19:23 ESV) When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,

It seems to me, Nicodemus takes it to be "**again**" and it seems just as clear that Jesus means it to be understood as "**from above.**" Anyway, Jesus answers Nicodemus' question with a clarification as if He is saying, "**You didn't understand that did you? Let me say it another way.**"

^{ESV} **John 3:5**...Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now, we are going to talk about what **"water and spirit"** might mean but I want to remind you of the tendency in Semitic literature to set things parallel to each other. Even before we go through what some of the options are, I think I should point out that more than likely...

born again = born from above = born of water and spirit

And even beyond looking down to verse 8 where it sort of repeats the idea in "everyone born of the spirit" probably means...

born again = born from above = born of water and spirit = born from above = born of the spirit

Now, having said that here are the major ways in which water and spirit have been understood...

- 1) Water meaning born of earthy means...like the water or amniotic fluid in a woman's womb. Or water could mean semen and the idea would be that it is just talking about regular natural birth. Spirit would then mean spiritually. So the whole statement would mean, **"Unless a man is born physically and then born spiritually he cannot enter the kingdom of God."**
- 2) Some take water to refer to Christian baptism. The statement would thus mean, **"Unless a man receives the rite of Christian baptism and is also regenerated by the spirit of God."**

- 3) Not Christian baptism but John's baptism meaning, **"Unless you are repentant and show that repentance by accepting John's baptism and then being regenerated by the Spirit you cannot enter the kingdom of God."**
- 4) Some have suggested that water stands for the Torah or perhaps Word of God meaning, **"Unless you apply yourself to obey the law or are convicted by the law and are regenerated from above you cannot see the kingdom of God."**
- 5) Finally some take water and spirit to refer to the life-giving work of God where he cleanses us hence the water and breathes life into us, hence the spirit which would cause the passage to be understood as, **"Unless the spirit cleanses you and regenerates you cannot enter the kingdom of God."**

This last idea is one that permeates the Old Testament.

^{ESV} **Isaiah 52:15**...so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

^{ESV} **Ezekiel 36:25**...I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

This last idea, that water and spirit refer to the live-giving work of God, is how Calvin took it. Listen to him:

Accordingly, he employed the words Spirit and water to mean the same thing, and this ought not to be regarded as a forced interpretation; for it is a frequent and common way of speaking in Scripture, when the Spirit is mentioned, to add the word Water or Fire, expressing his power. *It is* as if Christ had said that no man is a son of God until he has been renewed by water, and that this water is the Spirit who *cleanses* us anew and who, by spreading his energy over us,

imparts to us...heavenly life, though by nature we are utterly dry...By water, therefore, is meant nothing more than the inward purification and invigoration which is produced by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Anyway, here's the point. The new birth, this impartation of a new life and new standing before God, is the work of God and it comes from above. You can't work it up. You can't assist in it. You can't share in the glory of it. All of which harkens back to the very thing John made so clear in the prologue or opening eighteen verses of John.

^{ESV} **John 1:12**...But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And that is contrast John makes all that much clearer in verse 6.

^{ESV} **John 3:6** ...That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'⁸ 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."

Do you get the point? The new birth is like the wind. You can tell when it blowing but you can't predict it and you can't control it. It is the sovereign act of God.

^{ESV} **John 3:9**...Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

You see Nicodemus had a defective view of the righteousness of God. He was not a Pelagian. If you had asked Nicodemus if he was working his way to heaven I suspect he would have laughed. He knew salvation was a gracious act of God.

But to him the gracious act was God's planting him in the midst of the covenant community of Israel. To Nicodemus, works of righteousness, obedience and devotion to God and a cheerful submission to God's will would have made up his necessary work to stand righteous before God. Nicodemus was semi-Pelagian; he was thinking God does His part and I do my part to bring about my salvation.

But Jesus was saying something else altogether. He was saying that spiritual birth is entirely outside of a man's righteous or attempted righteousness. He had forgotten the words of Isaiah where he said...

^{ESV} **Isaiah 64:6**...We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment...

But Jesus is not going to let him go. You remember early on in the conversation that Nicodemus said to Jesus, **"We know such and such..."** Now Jesus is going to ask about that.

^{ESV} **John 3:10**...Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Now, the phrase that is used there "Israel's teacher" has a definite article attached to it in Greek. Literally, it is **"...you are the teacher of Israel and you don't know this stuff?"** But he doesn't stop there. In fact, he turns Nicodemus' own words right back on him. He says, **"You came to me saying 'we know such and such' and its pretty clear now that you didn't really know even the basics concerning spiritual life. Let me tell you what 'we' know."** I think Jesus is

saying, **“You have the title as the teacher of Israel but really you are just a teacher. I am *the* teacher.”** Look how he says that in verse 11.

^{ESV} **John 3:11**...Truly, truly, I say to you (sing.), we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you (plural) do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you (plural) earthly things and you (plural) do not believe, how can you (plural) believe if I tell you (plural) heavenly things?

Now some commentators have argued that Jesus uses **“we”** here to include the disciples or the John the Baptist but I think He is just turning Nicodemus’ words back to on him. It is almost like, **“We actually do know, we do.”**

Of course, the harder part of that is the **“I have spoken to you of earthly things.”** I think what he is saying is not that He is not speaking about spiritual matters but rather that He is speaking of the most rudimentary of spiritual matters. I think what He is saying is, **“I can’t go on to heavenly things because you don’t understand even the most basic of spiritual truths.”** But then He goes on to give Nicodemus hope. He says, **“You can’t “know” heavenly things because no one has ever gone up to heaven and returned to instruct you. But I do know such things because I came down from heaven.”**

^{ESV} **John 3:13**...No one has ascended into heaven except (I am taking the “except” here in the sense that it is used in Revelation 21:27 as “rather” or “instead”¹¹) he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

That is how the exact same construction is used in Revelation 21:27.

^{ESV} **Revelation 21:27**...But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Of course, the real issue is this, **“What does the one that came down from heaven know?”** What He knows is detailed in verses 14 and 15.

^{ESV} **John 3:14**...And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Now, to get a sense of what He said means, it is necessary to go back just for a minute and look at the account of the fiery serpents in Numbers 21.

^{ESV} **Numbers 21:5**...And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.

William Hendricksen makes the following observations¹²:

- In both cases death threatened as a punishment for sin.
- In both cases it is of Himself who, in His sovereign grace, provides a remedy for their sin.
- In both cases, the remedy consisted of something that must be lifted up in public view.
- In both cases those who, with a believing heart, look unto that which is lifted up, are healed

Now the principal point, I want to make is this. Jesus Himself claimed to have specific knowledge of God. Now, that knowledge was not displayed in the advancement of any wild ideas about God. No, it was set forth in the starkest of terms. **“Here’s what I know, having come down from heaven. The Son of Man**

must be lifted up, that is crucified and that those that look to Him in faith will gain eternal life.”

Now most commentators think that Jesus did not speak verses 16-21. They think instead that they form a later commentary added by John the Beloved to explain why the Son of Man had to be crucified. You don't have to accept that premise but follow the idea with me for a minute to get a sense of how most commentators understand the passage.

Most commentators understand Jesus words to Nicodemus to have ended in verse 15 and think that John looking back years later just could not contain himself but just burst out with commentary that explained what Jesus meant about having to be lifted up.

Now, John 3:16 is at the same time one of the most profound and glorious verse in the Bible. In fact, it has been without question the single most oft quoted verse in the Bible until this decade. Our own sinful generation has seemed to prefer Matthew 7:1 as its favorite verse.

^{KJV} **Matthew 7:1**...Judge not, that ye be not judged.

But in the history of western and Christian civilization this verse, John 3:16 has ruled supreme because it details the manner in which God loved the world. Now did you hear what I said, it details the manner in which God has demonstrated His love to the world. Most people think the verse is focusing on the quantity of God's love and certainly that is implied. Most people read the verse, **“For God loved the world so *Much* that he gave...”** However, that is not the way it

actually reads in English; it is certainly not the emphasis in the Greek. The “so” in...

^{ESV} **John 3:16**...“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

...is much better understood as a “thus” or as a “in this manner”. In Greek the word is “οὕτως” and it has already been used twice in verses that we have looked at earlier. First in verse 14....

^{ESV} **John 3:14**...And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

And in verse 8...

^{ESV} **John 3:8**...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.”

So, if I could connect the dots for you it would be something like this. Jesus finished off His discussion with Nicodemus by saying, “**I’ve come down from heaven and this is what I know....**”

^{ESV} **John 3:14**...And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Then starting in verse 16 John adds his own spirit-drawn conclusion...

^{NIV} **John 3:16...** *"For this is the way in which God demonstrated His love for the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

Now why is that important?

^{ESV} **John 3:17...** 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. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned,

Still he doesn't want there to be any confusion about that fact because if there happens to be anyone that doesn't trust in Jesus they don't get off free.

^{ESV} **John 3:17...** but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Then he wraps it up in 19-21.

^{ESV} **John 3:19...** 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. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ 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."

You see John is trying to present the superiority of Jesus over the synagogue, the temple, the law and here even the teachers, the best teachers of Judaism. He is doing by demonstrating the superiority of Jesus' spiritual understanding and insight over that of Nicodemus. But John isn't done with Nicodemus yet. He is going to come up twice more in John. First, he is going to come up in a scene where the Pharisees were going after Jesus in fashion hard and brutal.

^{ESV} **John 7:48**...Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹ But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." ⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

Now, I bring that story up because it uses a little phrase that is so easy to miss in our English Bible that I think harkens back to the discussion of Jesus and Nicodemus. You will remember and I spent some energy to get you to see the interplay between the two around the use of the word **"know"**.

Nicodemus said, **"We know you are a teacher sent from God..."**

And then Jesus responds by saying **"You know some stuff do you? Do you know this, 'A man must be born again to even see the kingdom of God?'"**

Finally Nicodemus responds to that saying, **"How can these things be?"**

And Jesus responded to him saying, **"You're the teacher of Israel and you don't know this stuff? Let me tell you what we know?"**

Anyway, when Nicodemus responds to their criticisms about Jesus he uses the words that Jesus had used on him. In verse 51, he says...

^{ESV} **John 7:51**...Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" ⁵² They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

I think what Nicodemus is saying is, **“Look I though I knew some stuff. I thought I had some wisdom. Before you make your mind about Him, perhaps you ought to go toe to toe with Him for a bit.”** In the end the testimony of Nicodemus seems easy enough to understand. John 19:38 tells us...

^{ESV} **John 19:38**...After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

I think by implication the point is that Nicodemus himself came to understand the significance of Jesus being lifted up and was drawn to him in faith. I think John's point is simple, **“Don't hang back. Don't hide in the darkness. Don't be timid put you faith here and you'll never be disappointed.”**

Brothers and sisters, that is my prayer for you. May God sustain and give you the answers to questions but more than that may He reveal to you the truth of His love for you in Christ and may He draw you to Himself in inexpressible love and power to you cannot help but see the matchless worth and superiority of Jesus.

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (Rvd.)* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 209. He writes: “Right from the opening verse of this Gospel John has been concerned to impress on his readers the surpassing excellence of Jesus. He is the Word become flesh. But He did not become flesh so to speak on general principles. He had a purpose. He came specifically in order that men might have the abundant life. In this chapter John furthers his purpose by recording a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a typical representative of Pharisaic Judaism. As such Nicodemus would have stressed the careful observance of the Law and the traditions of the elders. For the loyal Pharisee this was the way of salvation.”

² C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1998), 303. He writes: “To sum up: it seems clear that both the Miracle of Cana and the Cleansing of the Temple are σημεία which signify the same fundamental truth: that Christ has come to inaugurate a new order in religion. The fresh element which the second σημεῖον introduces is the cryptic allusion to the death and resurrection of Christ, which at this stage the uninstructed reader is to note with the expectation of clarification as the work proceeds. Meanwhile, the general theme is to be further illustrated in two discourses, which follow. (iii) The first of the two discourses takes the form of a dramatic dialogue, iii. i—to, passing into monologue from that point on. Various attempts have been made to determine at what point the conversation with Nicodemus is supposed to end, and a fresh exposition to begin. But in fact, although the discourse wanders from the immediate point of rebirth, there is continuity down to iii. 21. The transition from dialogue to monologue is characteristic of this writer’s manner.

Jesus is confronted with a representative of the old order which is being superseded; a peculiarly favorable and friendly representative— ‘the teacher of Israel’.”

³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 482-3. He writes: “The twin pillars of the Pharisaic system were “Torah and Tradition.” Torah (teaching, or law) was primarily the five books of Moses. A written law must be interpreted and applied. The process of applying the teaching contained in the Torah involved new precepts. The Pharisees differed from the Sadducees in giving divine authority to the interpretation and application of the law. “It is more culpable to teach against the ordinances of the scribes than against the Torah itself’ (Sanhedrin 11.3). The Sadducees answered the question “By what authority?” in terms of Deuteronomy 17:8-13, that the priests were to give the authoritative applications of the Torah, but their instructions were not Torah. The Pharisees, on the other hand, felt that the Torah had been given to all Israel, not just to the priests, and therefore was open to all who were competent to interpret it. Here the scribes came in. They were not identical with the Pharisees, but there is good reason why scribes and Pharisees appear together so frequently in the Gospels. The scribes were the official scholars of the Torah. Most of the scribes accepted the principles of the Pharisees, and the Pharisees followed the teachings derived from scribal interpretations. Moreover, the Pharisees felt that if the applications of the law were to be binding, they had to have the force of Torah itself. The means to achieve this was the idea of oral law (“tradition of the elders”; Mark 7:3, 5), equally authoritative with the written law (for more about the oral law see pp. 507-8.

The Pharisees appear to have been for the most part non-priests. The concerns of the rabbis who succeeded them, as indicated by rabbinic literature, would indicate that their adherents included small landowners and the shopkeepers and artisans of the towns. The Pharisees’ reputation for exactitude in the study and interpretation of the biblical law and their applications of it to areas of life where other Jews did not apply it distinguished them from other Jews. Their interpretations and applications were attributed to the “traditions of the elders.” The concern with ritual purity led to a great interest in the proper preparation of foods, careful observance of the agricultural laws, and meticulous tithing

Because the Pharisees saw Torah as a developing, dynamic social force, they sought to keep the law of Moses from becoming a dead ritual and to give it new meaning and life. Thus they were also open to further doctrinal developments — resurrection of the body, last judgment, and

rewards and punishment in the afterlife.

The flexibility of the Pharisees may also be seen in their approach to the problem of fate and free will. As characterized by Josephus, the three principal “philosophical schools” among the Jews were distinguished on this issue in this way: the Essenes assigned everything to fate (*heimarmene*); the Sadducees assigned everything to human freedom; and the Pharisees believed in both fate and free will (*Ant.* 13.5.9 [171~72]). Josephus was borrowing the Greek philosophical terminology; for fate one should understand God’s governance, or providence (cf. Gamaliel’s advice in Acts 5:38-39). As Rabbi Akiba expressed it, “All is foreseen but freedom is granted” (*Aboth* 3.16).⁴

See also... Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 251-2. He writes...“The Pharisaic communities of Jerusalem, several of which are known as we have seen, had strict rules of admission, which again shows their character as a closed society. Before admission there was a period of probation, one month or one year, during the course of which the postulant had to prove his ability to follow the ritual laws. Josephus for example tells us how he submitted himself successively the Pharisaic, to Sadducean and to Essene laws, and finally at the age of nineteen chose the Pharisees (*Vita 10ff.*). This specific example confirms that there was a probationary period before admission to a Pharisaic community.

Once this period was over, the candidate committed himself to observe the rules of the community. In the earlier period, which is the only time to concern us here, this pledge was taken before a member who was a scribe. The new member of the community bound himself to observe the Pharisaic laws on purity and tithes. Henceforward the Pharisee was a member of an association. These associations had their leaders and their assemblies; these last it seems, were linked with a common meal, particularly on Friday evening at the beginning of the Sabbath. It seems that Pharisaic associations sometimes made a public appearance, e.g. to express condolences or to take part in festal occasions. They had their own internal code of rules, and could agree among other things on the expulsion of a member.

We shall do well not to overestimate the number of members of these Pharisaic *habürot*. From a reliable source, transmitted to us by Josephus who probably had it from Nicholas of Damascus, the intimate counselor and historian of the court of Herod the Great— thus from a semi-official source—we learn of ‘more than six thousand’ Pharisees during Herod’s time throughout his kingdom. By way of comparison, let us quote other figures. The population of Jerusalem was about twenty-five to thirty thousand (p. 84); the priests and Levites together raised that number by about eighteen thousand; the Essenes were four thousand strong (*Ant.* 18.20). Incidentally, these numbers confirm that as far as the Pharisees are concerned, we are dealing with a marked group; and the size of their number confirms that in Jerusalem during the first century **AD**, there must have been several Pharisaic communities.”

⁴ Geoffrey Bromiley, Gen. Ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia V.3* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 822. ISBE states that the Pharisees staunchly believed in God’s providence while the Sadducees held to complete free will. It goes on to say that the Essenes were completely fatalistic. Perhaps a good analogy would be that the Essenes were hyper-Calvinistic, the Pharisees Calvinistic and the Sadducees Arminian. Of course, it is

ridiculously anacronistic but perhaps helpful as an illustration. Of course, there seemed to be a measure of difference even among the Pharisees. Clearly, Paul was a strong Calvinist in the modern sense of the word.

An older electronic version of ISBE has this... The account given of the doctrines of the Pharisees by Josephus is clearly influenced by his desire to parallel the Jewish sects with the Greek philosophical schools. He directs especial attention to the Pharisaic opinion as to fate and free will, since on this point the Stoic and Epicurean sects differed very emphatically. He regards the Pharisaic position as mid-way between that of the Sadducees, who denied fate altogether and made human freedom absolute, and that of the Essenes that "all things are left in the hand of God." He says "The Pharisees ascribe all things to fate and God, yet allow that to do what is right or the contrary is principally in man's own power, although fate cooperates in every action." It is to be noted that Josephus, in giving this statement of views, identifies "fate" with "God," a process that is more plausible in connection with the Latin *fatum*, "something decreed," than in relation to the impersonal *moira*, or Grk: *heimarmene*, of the Greeks. As Josephus wrote in Greek and used only the second of these terms, he had no philological inducement to make the identification; the reason must have been the matter of fact. In other words, he shows that the Pharisees believed in a personal God whose will was providence.

⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Life of Josephus* 38... "This Simon was of the city of Jerusalem, and of a very noble family of the sect of the Pharisees, which are supposed to excel others in the accurate knowledge of the laws of their country. Finally see Josephus, Wars of the Jews 2.8.14... But then as to the two other orders at first mentioned, the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These ascribe all to fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does co-operate in every action. They say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, — but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment."

⁶ Bromily, v.5, 332-3. He writes: "In number the Sanhedrin consisted of seventy members and the high priest as president (see Mish. Sanhedrin L6). The number seventy is significant. Moses chose seventy elders to assist him (Nu. 11:6), and several other Jewish groups had this number: seventy chiefs led the Jewish colony at Batanea (BJ ii.18.6 [482]; Life 56); Josephus appointed a council of seventy in Galilee (BJ ii.20.5 [571f.]); the Zealots chose seventy judges in Jerusalem (BJ iv.5.4 [336]); and a council of seventy-one elders ruled in Alexandria (Tos. Sukkah 4:6). Supposedly the LXX had seventy (or seventy-two) translators (Aristeas 46-50), and Jesus sent out seventy disciples (Lk. 10:1)."

Only the high priest could preside over the Sanhedrin (though later at Jamnia two scribes held the positions of president and assistant; see TDNT, VII, 863f. n. 22). Next in rank to the high priest were the chief priests, whose presence and power in the Sanhedrin were due to their office in the temple. They were uniformly members of the Sadducean aristocracy, which solidified them into a powerful party. Next came the elders, the term not being used in the original, broader sense of all members of the Sanhedrin, but in the later more narrow sense describing lay members of the Sanhedrin coming from the more influential families of Jerusalem, who like the chief priests were consistently Sadducees, The Sadducean monopoly of the Sanhedrin began to diminish under

Queen Alexandra when the pharisaic scribes gained admission. Herod's hostility toward the nobility led to a substantial increase in the pharisaic influence in the Sanhedrin, to the point that in the Roman period the Pharisees' support was necessary for any decision to be made or carried out. The resultant change in the complexion of the Sanhedrin was nevertheless not from a council of nobles to a community of scholars, but rather from a body ruled solely by the aristocracy to one, which was a mixture of sadducean nobility (priestly and lay) and pharisaic scholars. It is not known how these members were selected, though ordination may have been a criterion.

⁷ Ferguson, Everett, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 535.

⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 186.

⁹ Carson, 190. Carson writes: "Nicodemus's incredulous response is part of a recurring pattern of misunderstanding followed by further explanation in this Gospel (*cf.* notes on 2:20). It is far from certain Nicodemus was quite as obtuse as a casual reading of his response might suggest (*cf.* Meyer, 1. 163, 'of a somewhat slow temperament': is this likely of 'Israel's teacher' [3:10]?). Some have wondered if he was purposely setting a metaphorical problem against a metaphorical challenge — *i.e.* he understood that Jesus was demanding some sort of transformation of an individual's entire character, but he could not see how an old man, decisively shaped by his heritage and firmly set in his ways, could possibly turn the clock back and start all over again as a new person. He could not possibly *enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!* This reconstruction is too subtle, and ignores the theme of the kingdom of God, introduced by Jesus' challenge (v. 3). For a man like Nicodemus, entering the kingdom of God did not have to do with the transformation of an individual's character but with participation in the resurrection life of the new order God would powerfully bring about at the end of history. There is no evidence he was wistfully feeling the force of Tennyson's famous sigh, 'Ah for a man to arise in me / That the man I am may cease to be.'

A more realistic view is that Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was talking about at all. At this point he could not believe (v. 12) that new birth was a requirement for entrance into the kingdom and was amazed (v. 7) by the very category. His response in v. 4 is therefore marked with incredulousness, which prompts him to reply with a crassly literalistic interpretation of what Jesus had said, as a way of expressing a certain degree of scorn."

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on John* (AGES Calvin CDRom) 3.5

¹¹ Carson, 200. He writes: Resolution is found in the fact that *ei me*, often translated 'except', can introduce an exception to the general idea that has been introduced, without providing an exception to what is explicitly stated in the immediately preceding clause. English usage in such cases often demands 'but', 'but rather' or 'but only' rather than 'except'. Compare Revelation 21:27: 'Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only (*ei me*) those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.' Clearly those written in the Lamb's book of life are not thought to be impure, shameful or deceitful; the translation would be highly misleading in this context if *ei me* were rendered by 'except' (*cf.* also Mt. 12:4; Lk. 4:27; Acts 27:22; probably Gal. 1:19). True, in all these instances the member in the *ei me* clause

proves to be the only one that does the action described in the first clause: in the example from Revelation 21:27, only those whose names are written in the book of life actually enter the holy city. Applied to John 3:13, that might be taken to mean that the only one who has ascended is the one who has descended. But the flow of the argument and the peculiar perfect *anabebēken* ('has ascended') conspire to focus the 'exception' rather differently. Jesus can speak of heavenly things (v. 12), and (*kai*) no-one [else] has ascended into heaven and remained there [so as to be able to speak authoritatively about heavenly things] but only the one who has come down from heaven [is equipped to do so] (*cf* Lagrange, 80–81; Westcott, 1.53; Moloney, 53-59).

¹² William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-1954), vol. 1, 138.