

Reading the Old Testament Through John Nicodemus

Maybe the most memorized verse in the New Testament is found in the gospel of John, chapter three. Verse 16 is the oft quoted affirmation,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The verse has punch because it clearly sets the good news of God's work to redeem humanity in just 25 words (counting in the Greek, 23 in English).

The story that birthed this famous verse is also compelling. It is the story of a Jewish teacher, steeped in knowledge and training of the Old Testament encountering Yeshua, at first glance, a 30-year-old Jewish carpenter from the hill country of Galilee. Yet upon deeper examination, one who not only knew the Old Testament intimately, but one who was the fulfillment of its deepest prophetic promises.

Reading the story carefully reveals insights that magnify the importance of God's work, through the understanding of the interplay of the Old Testament into the conversation of these two, Nicodemus the teacher of Israel and Yeshua the Son of God.

The Storyline

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

A Journey from Night to Light

John's gospel is one of journeys. John detailed Jesus taking his disciples on three trips to Jerusalem. The other gospels just detail the last fateful trip that resulted in the crucifixion. In John, Jesus roams throughout Galilee, through Samaria, and in lesser known villages and towns. But John doesn't only detail Jesus' journeys. John recorded Jesus' call on humanity to journey back into God's seeking arms. This journey is apparent in the interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. This is significant. John doesn't want it missed. When John references Nicodemus years later after Jesus is being removed from the cross, John still refers to Nicodemus as, "Nicodemus, who earlier had come to Jesus by night" (Jn. 19:39). Some point out that Nicodemus must have wanted the relative anonymity that nighttime afforded from the idle looks of others. Others point out, however, that nighttime for the pious was seen as the time for studying the Jewish Scriptures, and so it was an appropriate time for the encounter. Still others think that John was merely painting an atmosphere of mystery.

It seems to me that the interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus as recorded by John offers the best explanation. This is a reference to Nicodemus's journey. Factually, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, yet also metaphorically Nicodemus was in the dark as he encountered Jesus. In John, darkness represents the realm of ignorance, untruth, and even evil. In John 9:4-5 Jesus explained his urgency in mission using this metaphor,

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

Jesus returns to the metaphor as John recorded in John 11:10,

But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.

As John unfolds the encounter, John recalled how Jesus even used the darkness of the night to call Nicodemus into an enlightened walk with God as Jesus explained,

light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God (John 3:19-21).

Perhaps most graphically, however, is the contrast John gives between Nicodemus, a true-hearted Pharisee seeking God intellectually and personally and Judas, a betraying friend who has every reason to believe, yet ultimately refuses to do so. Judas's descent into evil and betrayal is explained in John as the opposite of Nicodemus. Nicodemus came by night into the light, while Judas came from the light into darkness.

Then after he [Judas] had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ... So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night (Jn. 13:27-30).

An Empowering Journey

When reading the Greek of John 3:2-9, one word continually jumps out: *dynamai* (δύναμαι). This word in the Greek denotes an ability or capability for doing something. Frequently, English translators use the simple, "can" or "is able" to

translate it. The word is found in these passages, bolded and highlighted for ease of spotting:

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one **can do** these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he **cannot** see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How **can** a man be born when he is old? **Can** he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he **cannot** enter the kingdom of God. ... Nicodemus said to him, “How **can** these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? (Jn. 3:2-10).

The journey Jesus called Nicodemus to take was one that seemed impossible by worldly wisdom. Nicodemus correctly understood that Jesus was capable of the extraordinary. Jesus did signs that no normal person could do. For Nicodemus, this confirmed that God’s hand was on Jesus. In Nicodemus’s mind, Jesus was obviously a “teacher come from God.”

John knows, and more importantly by this time John’s readers know, that Jesus wasn’t simply a teacher from God. Jesus was the Word made flesh, the reflection of God. In truth, Jesus was God “tabernacling” or dwelling with humanity to draw people unto himself. Jesus was doing the unheard of, impossible for a mere human to do, bringing God to human form to pay the human penalty for sin. This journey Jesus called Nicodemus to take was one of God’s empowering.

This is why Jesus brought a sharp contrast to what Nicodemus had assumed. Nicodemus called Jesus a “teacher come from God,” when Jesus was much more. Jesus was the “only begotten Son” sent from God! Consider the contrast in Jesus’ interchange:

Nicodemus

“We know [*oida* in the Greek] you are a teacher from God”
(Verse 2)

Jesus

“You are a teacher for Israel and you *don’t* understand. We speak of what *we know* [again, *oida* in the Greek]” (Verse 10)

Nicodemus saw Jesus as a teacher, Jesus taught Nicodemus that Jesus was much more than that. This was part of Nicodemus's journey of empowerment. It was going to let God do things in Nicodemus's life, that Nicodemus could never do himself.

Jesus explained that the journey to God was one that require a new birth. John's writing in Greek allows a very useful pun for what Jesus taught Nicodemus. Nicodemus would need to be "born again." The term translated "again" also means "from above." English, like most every language, also has words that have two different meanings, even though spelled the same.



The Greek word translated "born again" is *anōthen* (ἀνωθεν). It means "from above" in passages like Matthew 27:51 where "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top [*anōthen*-ἀνωθεν] to bottom." Similarly John uses it for "from above" in John 19:11,

Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above [*anōthen*-ἀνωθεν]. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

The word is used in the sense of "again" in passages like Paul's writing in 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 [*anōthen*-ἀνωθεν] to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

John's readers might at first be confused by his rendering of the conversation into this Greek pun. Did Jesus mean be born "from above" or be born "again"? John lets the reader see the confusion in what Jesus was saying as experienced by Nicodemus. Jesus spoke of an experience with God that was a new birth. It was one that wasn't from the seed of Adam or any other human, but one that came directly from God. In this sense, it was a new birth that was from above.

Barclay does a marvelous job capturing this fullest thought in his translation, "unless a man is reborn from above." Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel stumbles over what seems impossible. No one is going to be born again in the sense of climbing back into the womb. Jesus isn't speaking of anything so crude, however. Jesus is

speaking of God giving life to those who are dead. God is putting light into darkness.

Nicodemus should not have been unable to grasp the concept. It is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. While not common, it is found in passages like Exodus 4:22 where God refers to Israel as his “son.”

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.

Similarly, in Deuteronomy 32:6, in the Song of Moses, Moses referenced those who would forget God terming Israel as someone born from God.

Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?

Perhaps the most important and graphic passage is found in the prophetic book of Hosea. If Nicodemus had thought through his minor prophets, he might have seen that Jesus was fulfilling a key Old Testament promise.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.

...

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

God’s promise to Israel as a tender Father was one of love and commitment. Israel was God’s son, given birth and life by the Father. The idea of God taking one and giving him a new life, a new relationship, a new Father, should not have been foreign to Nicodemus. God could and would do what no human could.

An Expectant Journey

As Nicodemus thought of birth events, he thought in earthly lineage terms. Genealogies, inheritance, God's chosen people – all of these ideas were pregnant in the birthing concept. This is the way Nicodemus thought. So when Jesus said someone must be born anew (or “from above”), Nicodemus kept thinking in terms of biology. Jesus chided Nicodemus that as a teacher of Israel, he should know better. He should know there is a spiritual perspective that exceeds the earthly one.

Although Nicodemus was strained to understand what Jesus was teaching, the promise of Jesus wasn't in language that should have been foreign to Nicodemus. Rather the language and the promise was in line with what the prophets of old had taught. As a side note, the way Jesus spoke should have brought the prophets to mind. Nicodemus asked Jesus three questions¹ (the first is implicit, the second and third express). Jesus answered each time with the sincere, “Truly, truly I say...” This expression (*amēn amēn* in the original language), conveyed a carefully thought out, solemn affirmation.

Jesus called the new birth from above as one of “water and Spirit.” That comes from passages like Ezekiel 36.

Ezekiel 36 is prophetic to a time when the Jews would return from their exile in Babylon. The first third of Ezekiel 36, explains that God will re-inhabit Judah and its villages with Jews. The second third speaks of God's motivation – that he will do this NOT because the Jews were worthy. They weren't. They had dishonored God and his holy name time after time after time. Yet it was the FACT of God and his holy name, that would cause God to bring the Jews back. In a sense, God, because of his own character, was going to *rebirth* the Jews into their lands.

Here the last third of Ezekiel 36 comes to bear. God would do this, not simply as a physical matter. God was going to provide a spiritual rebirth. God was going to “sprinkle clean water” on the Jews and give them “a new heart” and a “new spirit.” God was going to cleanse his people and give them this new start and new life.

¹ Numbers are important in John. The number three was a symbolic number for things divine, and John uses it many times in his gospel. In the Nicodemus passage, for example, Nicodemus asks three questions. Jesus gives three answers. Three times Jesus explains one must be “born anew,” born “of water and spirit,” and “born anew.” Jesus' narrative responses break into a trinity as well. In verses 3-8 Jesus speaks of the Spirit; in verses 11-15 Jesus speaks of the Son; and, in verses 16-21 Jesus speaks of the Father.

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. 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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek 36:25-36:27).

While Nicodemus was failing to grasp the import of what Jesus was teaching, Jesus noted that there was much about God that Nicodemus didn't understand. Using the pun of "spirit" in Greek (and Hebrew)² as a word that meant both "wind" and "spirit," Jesus reminded Nicodemus that the Spirit/wind blows where it pleases. Nicodemus neither explained it nor controlled it. So it was with God. God was at work, and that was the important thing not to be missed. Nicodemus should have understood this in line with the assurance from Ecclesiastes 11:5,

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

Today many might struggle to find these Old Testament references in the storyline, but in John's day, people like Nicodemus spent their lives studying, learning, and memorizing the Old Testament. Passages obscure to many today were well-known in Nicodemus's time. Over and over the Old prophets spoke of the coming days when God would pour out water and Spirit. Isaiah used the imagery.

For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants (Is. 44:3).

The desert community at Qumran wrote of the same ideas. The community had a rule of instruction and in it explained of God's coming judgment, echoing the Old Testament prophetic metaphors of God coming in water and spirit. The fourth column of the scroll explains in verses 20-22,

God will then purify every deed of man with this truth; He will refine for Himself the human frame by rooting out all spirit of falsehood from the bounds of his flesh. He will cleanse him of all wicked deeds with the spirit of holiness; like purifying waters He will shed upon him the spirit of truth (to cleanse him) of all abomination and falsehood. And he shall be plunged into the spirit of purification that

² The Greek word *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) means both "wind" and "spirit" as does the Hebrew word *ruach* (רוּחַ).

he may instruct the upright in the knowledge of the Most High and teach the wisdom of the sons of heaven to the perfect of way.

Yet Nicodemus was still needing to be schooled. So Jesus reached back into the wilderness experience to explain how this salvation from God would come to the world.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (Jn. 3:15).

Jesus was referencing Numbers 21. Numbers 21 recounted how God used the Israelites to destroy pagan kings. Afterwards, the Israelites responded with whining and complaining, even indicting God for failing to give them the kind of trip from Egypt to which they believed themselves entitled. God sent snakes among the people as judgment, and many died. Coming to their senses, the people repented and sought God's forgiveness and rescue. It came in the form of a bronze serpent Moses had fashioned and placed on a pole. Moses held the serpent high, and those who looked upon it were saved.

This is the prophetic image Jesus used with Nicodemus with the promise that Jesus would be lifted high (Calvary), and that the repentant souls seeking God's salvation who looked upon Jesus in faith, would be saved. From there Jesus gives the famous verse,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This verse is powerful in many ways, two of which are notable in this lesson. First, Nicodemus and Israel were comfortable that God loved the offspring of Abraham enough to do some mighty incredible things. But Jesus took it further. What God was doing in Jesus wasn't just out of a love for Abraham or David. God was loving on a much grander scale. God loved "the world."

Second, in the passage this love of God prompted God to "give" his only Son. The verb "give" (*didōmi* - δίδωμι) is a generous word. The word is used in the sense of "donating" or "bestowing" to another. It is the word Paul used over and over in referencing the death of Jesus. In Romans, Paul explained,

He who did not spare his own Son but ***gave*** [*didōmi* - δίδωμι] him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32).

Similarly, in Galatians Paul used the idea of God's gracious donation or gift of Jesus.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:3-4).

In Galatians 2:20-21, Paul makes the important tie between the gift of Jesus and the grace of God

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and **gave** [*didōmi* - δίδωμι] himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Gal. 2:20-21).

The Greek for "grace" (*charis* - χάρις) is rooted in the idea of a favor or gracious deed given to or for another. This is the "grace of God" that saves, according to Paul in Ephesians 2:8-10. Humanity is saved by God's "grace" or "gift," just as Jesus explained to Nicodemus. God "gave" the world Jesus for salvation.

Points for Home

The call of Jesus to journey is a call for everyone in the world. It is a call to leave darkness and walk in the light. It is a call to the power of God. It is a call to a new life of promise, graciously given from God as promised long ago through his prophets.