

John 3a Nicodemus

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Overview

Recall that the “real” boundaries of the section do not correspond with the chapter divisions. John alternates between “in-Jerusalem” and “out-of-Jerusalem” sections. The current “in-Jerusalem” section begins in 2:13 and continues through 3:22. In 3:23, the focus shifts out of Jerusalem and remains there through chapter 4.

The previous subsection, 2:13-22, showed in the cleansing of the temple how “his own received him not.” This section begins with a general statement of the principles governing our Lord’s interactions with those who believed in his name, and then illustrates them in one particular case, Nicodemus.

2:23-25, Prolog

23, many believed ..., when they saw the miracles.—Nicodemus is an example of one of these; compare 3:2. The causal order (miracles → belief) shows their superficiality

24a, Jesus did not commit himself unto them.—We see an example of this in how the Lord challenges Nicodemus in 3:3-15. There is an important lesson here for us in evangelism. We are sometimes so eager to get to a decision that we push people even when they are not ready. Our Lord challenged even those who came willingly to him, who (at least superficially) satisfied 1:12. He recognized, as he taught in Luke 8:13, that some “for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.”

24b-25, he knew all men, ... he knew what was in man.—This strategy was based on a deep understanding of the fickleness and rebelliousness of the human heart, which is the subject of the Evangelist’s commentary in 3:16-22.

1-22, Jesus and Nicodemus

This section has two parts. First there is a dialog between Nicodemus and the Lord, in which Nicodemus speaks three times and the Lord replies to each of his statement. Then the evangelist offers his comments on the interchange.

1-15, Nicodemus and Jesus

The point of the conversation is to establish the Lord’s superiority to Nicodemus as a spiritual authority. Nicodemus makes three short statements, to which the Lord responds.

1. Nicodemus tries to establish a relation of professional parity with Jesus, as rabbi to rabbi, but the Lord directly rebuffs him and challenges his most basic spiritual qualification.
2. Nicodemus misunderstands the Lord’s challenge, and the Lord explains the need for a spiritual birth.
3. Nicodemus is completely flustered, and the Lord directly asserts his superior authority.

In each case the Lord initiates his statement with “verily, verily.” This statement asserts the authority and finality of his declarations. Nicodemus wants a collegial discussion. The Lord speaks with authority and certainty. The issue is not whether Jesus wants to become Nicodemus’ peer, but whether Nicodemus is willing to become Jesus’ disciple.

1-2a, Background on Nicodemus

Note *who* he is and *when* he came. Both of these set the stage for the startling confrontation that he is about to have with Jesus.

Who was he?

Pharisees.—We have met this group before, in 1:24, where they led the inquiry into the credentials of John the Baptist. According to Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.11ff), they were one of three theological parties recognized in NT times, the others being the Essenes and the Sadducees. Only the Pharisees and the Sadducees are mentioned in the NT, probably because the Essenes “live by themselves” in a communistic economy (*Ant* 18:20-21), and so did not interact extensively with the people or spend much time in the cities where the Lord ministered. (The community at Qumran associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls is probably to be identified with the Essenes.)

The table compares the two “urban” sects, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Feature	Pharisee	Sadducee
Immortality?	Spirit is immortal; leads to resurrection	The soul dies with the body.
Scripture?	OT plus oral tradition	Only the written law
Sovereignty of God?	Yes, but with qualifications (Essenes were rigidly predestinarian)	No—man is sovereign
Political power	More popular with the people	Allied with upper classes; controlled high priesthood (Acts 5:17)

Their focus on the oral traditions made the Pharisees the scholarly party, and they predominated in the Sanhedrin, the “supreme court” of Judaism.

Ruler of the Jews.—That is, he was one of the Sanhedrin, the seventy senior Jews who made up Israel’s supreme spiritual court.

When did he Come?

by night.—John tends to note the time not only, or even mainly, for historical precision, but to make a theological point. For instance,

- The “next day” notes in 1-2 are organized to set up a new creation week, extending the echo of Genesis in 1:1.
- Judas’ exit in 13:30 is noted to be at night.
- John 9:4, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.”

It is likely we should see the time reference here as significant. Nicodemus is hesitant to be seen with Jesus. Nicodemus is a noted Jerusalem scholar; Jesus, a country boy from Galilee. Nicodemus is linked with the influential temple hierarchy, which Jesus has just challenged. By coming at night, Nicodemus avoids stimulating suspicion on the part of his colleagues.

See Gill for references showing that the Jews often used the night hours for theological study.

At the same time, he does come, which sets him apart from his colleagues. He is open enough to want to hear what Jesus has to say, and in the end (19:39) shows his devotion to the Lord.

2b-3, First Interchange

In summary, in the first interchange Nicodemus tries to get Jesus to agree that they are two teachers so that they can interact on a professional, scholarly level, and the Lord directly rebuffs his initiative.

2b, Nicodemus: We're ready to acknowledge you as one of us.

His statement has three parts: the title he gives Jesus, his confession, and the reason he gives for it.

Rabbi.—He acknowledges Jesus as a teacher. It was one thing for fishermen like Andrew and John to say this (1:38), but quite another for a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus clearly means this as a great complement. “You should be very honored that someone of my status, a member of the Sanhedrin, would recognize your credentials.”

We know.—Literally, “We know that from God you have come as a teacher.” Three details bear attention.

- “We,” showing that there were others among the Pharisees who were disposed to think well of Jesus. Compare the dissension in 9:16. Nicodemus presents himself as representing a faction within the influential Pharisees who are sympathetic to Jesus. He is offering Jesus the chance to ally himself with them.
- “From God,” while most of the rabbis came from the rabbinical schools. Both our Lord (7:15) and his disciples (Acts 4:13) were criticized for being “unlearned,” without the benefit of such an education. Nicodemus correctly ascribes our Lord’s authority as a teacher to a higher source. He has come from God, not from the Yeshivot.
- “As a teacher.” This was a high calling among the Jews, and one associated with Messiah (Isa 2:2,3), but it is by no means restricted to Messiah. Nicodemus is willing to discuss his doctrine, but (not surprisingly) does not yet glimpse his deeper mission.

For.—The reason for his belief is the miracles that he has seen. Recall from our study of ch. 2 that the flesh says, “If I see, I will believe” (20:25), while our Lord says, “If you believe, you will see” (11:40).

It is not wrong to believe because of the signs. They were given to render men inexcusable in rejecting the Lord. But it is a stronger belief when the Spirit of God directly attests the Lord’s words to our hearts. Compare the Lord’s words to Philip in 14:11, “Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake.” For all his learning in

the Scriptures, Nicodemus is responding to the Lord Jesus from the flesh and not from the spirit, just as the multitudes were. His mass of formal learning was of no value spiritually.

No man can do.—Here Nicodemus uses a word that is characteristic of John, and particularly of John 3, *dunamai*. It appeared for the first time in Nathanael’s question in 1:46, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” This verb appears 37 times in John, more than in any other NT book, and it appears 7x in ch. 3, more than in any other chapter of John.

Interestingly, all of the uses of the verb in John are either questions (“How can one do xyz?”) or denials (“You cannot do xyz.”) Typically, people ask the questions, and the Lord responds with the denials. Over and over again these exchanges emphasize that salvation is not something that we can win for ourselves. We must receive power to become the children of God (1:12), and this happens, not from the will of man, but of God.

3, The Lord’s Challenge

The politically appropriate thing for Jesus to say would be, “Thank you very much. I’m honored at your recognition of my mission. Let’s talk about the role you can play in supporting it.” Instead, his demeanor as well as his words directly challenge Nicodemus.

Verily, verily.—Jesus alone in the Greek Bible uses the expression, “Verily I say unto you.” This expression occurs 75 times, always in the gospels, most frequently in Matthew and John. It indicates the authority and finality of his statements. Notably, only John doubles it: “verily, verily.” With this expression introducing each of this three responses to Nicodemus, the Lord indicates that he is not entering into a discussion, but rather offering authoritative statements that Nicodemus must either accept or reject.

He cannot see the kingdom of God.—Each phrase, “cannot,” “see,” and “kingdom of God,” is a direct rebuff of Nicodemus.

1. Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus’ authority as a teacher from God because otherwise he would not be able to do miracles. Jesus suggests that Nicodemus himself may not be able to do something crucial: to see the kingdom of God. This is the first of many times that the Lord tells people that they cannot save themselves:
 - a. 3:5, cannot enter the kingdom without birth from above
 - b. 6:44, cannot come except the Father draw
 - c. 12:39 “they could not believe”
 - d. compare 5:44 “how can ye believe?”
2. There is a close linguistic link between the verb “see” and Nicodemus’ word “we know.” Both come from the same root, and sound similar. Nicodemus had said, “We know,” and the Lord is saying, “Do you know? In fact, can you even perceive?”
3. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus has come from God as a teacher. The Lord replies that the real issue is not the appearance of one more teacher, but the advent of the kingdom of God, the Messianic age. Nicodemus’ failure to recognize his greater mission is what suggests that in spite of his confession, he really cannot see.

Except a man be born again.—The Lord now gives a diagnosis of the limited insight that Nicodemus evidenced in his greeting. He has not been born from above, born of God.

Nicodemus acknowledged that the Lord was sent from God, yet Nicodemus himself gives evidence of lacking any such divine power.

Note the implications of the Lord's response for the doctrines of grace. Nicodemus is interested in the scriptures, open to Jesus' teaching, curious enough to come to visit him. But without the intervention of God's Spirit bringing the new birth, he cannot understand! We have already seen this point made in the prolog: 1:5, 10, 11-13.

Application: Both Nicodemus' approach to the Lord, and the Lord's response, are instructive to us.

- The world will often approach us as Nicodemus did our Lord, vaunting its credentials and flattering us that it will accept us as a peer. In doing so, it is trying to blunt the force of our testimony and diminish our distinctiveness.
- We must recognize clearly that we do not need the world's credentials. To rely on its validation would be to take a step down, not up. Our role is to challenge and reprove it, and we cannot do that if we allow it to seduce us into a collegial relationship.

This interchange is reflected in my interaction with my professor at Harvard in graduate school. He thought of himself clearly as a Christian, but was very liberal, and showed no sign of true spiritual understanding. At our introductory interview he acknowledged that he knew of my evangelical background, and sought to assure me that he would respect that. He said something like, "In spite of our differences, I'm sure we can work together as brothers in Christ."

The Lord made it very clear to me that I must not let this gesture pass. I replied, "I look forward to working with you and learning from you, but if you believe what I think you believe about the nature of the Bible and the person and work of Christ, I cannot acknowledge you as a brother in Christ." This was quite an awkward moment, but as it surfaced in our conversations over the subsequent four years, it was clear that at least I had prompted him to think, and it kept the door open for me to maintain a spiritual testimony to him.

Significantly, it also led to criticism from some of my professors at Dallas, to whom the story somehow got back. They felt that my stance would make it more difficult for subsequent Dallas students to be accepted at Harvard for graduate study. Sadly, they valued the credentials of men more than the ability to have a straightforward testimony to a poor lost sinner.

4-8, Second Interchange

In the second interchange, the Lord explains the need for a birth from above, and makes clear that this is something that God does to man, not that man can do for himself.

4, Nicodemus.—The expression "born again" is a pun. The Greek word "again" can also be translated "from above." For two reasons, we can see that this is the meaning that the Lord intends:

1. John uses the term only in this sense in other passages (3:31; 19:11, 23).
2. When the Lord explains the term in vv. 4-8, he explains it in terms of the action of God's spirit, a heavenly intervention in a person's life.

But Nicodemus has no experience of the intervention of the heavenly into earthly life. The only sense he can give to the phrase is “born again,” and that makes no physical sense to him, so he asks for an explanation.

Application: The heavenly birth, coming after the physical birth, is also a “new birth,” but not every “new birth” is a “heavenly birth.” A person might describe any life-changing experience as a “new birth,” and this confusion has cheapened the term in modern usage. Some of us can recall that when Jimmy Carter popularized the term “born again” during his presidency, even the publisher of a pornographic magazine claimed that he had been “born again” (Larry Flynt of Huckster, supposedly converted by Carter’s mother, Ruth Carter Stapleton). Recall the evangelist Dwight L. Moody’s comment when an associate pointed out a drunk in the gutter and asked, “Isn’t that one of your converts?” Moody reportedly replied, “It must be. It certainly wasn’t one of God’s.” We should be careful in speaking to people to emphasize that what is required is not a new start, but a heavenly one—the intervention of God into our lives by his sovereign grace and power, binding us to complete submission to his authority.

How can a man be born again?—Nicodemus’ question is one of many that unbelievers formulate with *dunamai* throughout this book. What the Lord requires is beyond human capability, and they sense this.

5, water and spirit.—This explanation of the new birth has stimulated numerous interpretations. Three merit consideration.

1. In liturgical churches, it is common to understand “water” to refer to baptism, and to indicate that baptism is essential to salvation. The greatest problem with this interpretation is that our Lord clearly expects Nicodemus to understand his explanation (v.10), and Nicodemus could not have understood this allusion. He could only have known Jewish baptisms (such as that of John), which signify cleansing. Christian baptism is a very different rite, which indicates our identification with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6), and it would be incoherent for the Lord to refer to this at this point.
2. More attractive is the view that the water refers to fleshly birth, and that the Lord is saying that two births are needed to enter the kingdom: a fleshly one and a spiritual one. “Nicodemus, it’s not enough for you to be born of water. You must also be born of the Spirit.” This view has three weaknesses.
 - a. the association of water with physical birth, while physiologically appropriate, is not a part of biblical imagery.
 - b. “Born of water” is presented as a condition for entering the kingdom, not as something that is true of everyone.
 - c. Note that the second “of” is in italics. The Greek text has only one preposition, one must be born “of water and spirit,” suggesting that only one birth is in view, not two.
3. I prefer a third option, building on the Lord’s expectation in v.10 that Nicodemus’ knowledge of the OT should make this clear to him. The OT frequently associates water with the Spirit in describing God’s care of his people:

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- a. In the wilderness, “Thou gavest also thy good **spirit** to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them **water** for their thirst” (Neh 9:20).
- b. In the messianic age, “I will pour **water** upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my **spirit** upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring” (Isa 44:3). The emphasis here, as in Neh, is on the refreshment that water brings. This verse almost equates water with Spirit, as do our Lord’s words in John 7:37-39
- c. A slightly different emphasis, and one more suited to John 3, comes in the description of the New Covenant, Ezek 36:25-27, “Then will I sprinkle clean **water** upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new **spirit** will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my **spirit** within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.” Here water recalls the purificatory sprinklings in Jewish law (for leprosy in Lev 14:51; of the Red Heifer in Num 19, cf. vv. 13, 18, 19, 20, 21). The water indicates that the heavenly birth removes previous defilement; the Spirit indicates that it ensures future holiness

These passages may lie behind Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 6:11, “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

6, flesh ... spirit.—Here the Lord makes clear that the birth in question is not “again” but “from above,” originating from God’s Spirit.

7, ye must.—Note the shift to the plural pronoun. Nicodemus had come as the representative of a group within the Pharisees (v.2). The Lord now broadens his remarks to include them. He is not singling out Nicodemus as needful of this heavenly birth. His colleagues need it as well.

8, wind.—The force of this verse depends on a pun. In both Hebrew and Greek, the words for “wind” and “spirit” are identical. So the Lord uses characteristics of physical wind to illustrate the nature of the spirit’s work in regeneration.

- “bloweth where it listeth.” It goes where it wants to go. You cannot control it. It is sovereign, autonomous.
- “hearest the sound.” Its effects are visible and undeniable.
- “canst not tell.” This reinforces the first point. You can sense it, but not predict it, much less control it.

Manmade religion is all about attempts by people to predict and control the spiritual realm. Here, the Lord invalidates all such efforts. Man is utterly helpless before the God of the Bible. We have no control over him, and our only hope is to cast ourself on his mercy and submit completely to him.

9-15, Third Interchange

9 Nicodemus.—Once again, the “How can” question shows the sense of helplessness that comes upon the children of Adam when we are confronted with the demands of a holy God. He is so flustered even to formulate a clear question. answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

10 Jesus.—Now the Lord directly asserts his superiority over Nicodemus, coming full circle to Nicodemus’ condescending greeting in v.2. First the Lord challenges Nicodemus’ credentials, then presents two facets of his own role: authoritative teacher, and powerful savior. Each of these claims builds on a distinct OT passage, and each shows how our Lord’s ministry goes beyond the earthly.

10-12, The Challenge

A master of Israel.—Literally, “the master of Israel.” Nicodemus is preeminent among the Jewish rabbis. Yet his lack of understanding of “these things,” which lie at the core of Israel’s messianic hope, show how shallow in fact his understanding is. This challenge is almost given as an aside, since it precedes the “verily, verily” that marks the beginning of each of our Lord’s main points. The Lord shows real surprise at Nicodemus’ lack of perception.

We ... ye.—Nicodemus had come representing a group, “We know ...” (v.2). The Lord himself now associates himself with a group, probably the company of OT prophets, and intimates that Nicodemus and his group do not receive what this group has taught.

We know ... have seen.—The foremost characteristic of this group with which the Lord associates himself is their first-hand experience of that which they teach. We considered the word “witness” (of which “testify” is simply the verbal form) in discussing 1:15. The Pharisees’ route to knowledge emphasized preserving the sayings of those who had gone before, the “tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:3), but the apostles and prophets uniformly emphasize their own immediate experience:

- “I saw the Lord,” Isaiah (6:1); Micaiah (1 Kings 22:19); Amos (9:1)
- “that which we have seen and heard, declare we unto you,” 1 John 1:3
- “we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard,” Peter (Acts 4:20)
- “we are witnesses of all things which he did,” Peter (Acts 10:39)
- Ananias told Paul, “thou shalt be his witness to all men of what thou hast seen and heard,” Acts 22:15

We cannot give to others what we have not received. We cannot teach what we have not experienced. One of the greatest weaknesses of the church is when people teach out of a second-hand experience, learned from other people but not based in their own experience of the Lord.

In the context, what the Lord and the company of the prophets have all experienced is the direct work of the HS in their lives, the principle of the sovereign intervention of God in a human life.

(Balancing note: the NT does exhort us to preserve the teaching of the apostles:

- Jude 2, contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints

- 2 Tim 2:2, “the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.
- 2 Thes 2:15, “hold the traditions which ye have been taught”
- 1 Cor 11:2, “keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you,” cf. 11:23, “I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you”

The *content* of our teaching must conform to the Scriptures, as illustrated in the zeal of the Bereans to evaluate everything by the standard of Scripture. But we cannot convincingly *communicate* these truths to men unless we have first experienced them ourselves. Cf. Haddon Robinson’s definition of a sermon: “the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, literal study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.”)

12, earthly things ... heavenly things.—What are the “earthly things” of which the Lord has told Nicodemus? The clue is the parallel between “ye did not believe” and v. 11 “ye receive not our witness.” The “earthly things” are what the “we,” the company of prophets, could have told Nicodemus based on their personal experience. But the Lord has experience that goes beyond theirs, and he shifts from the plural “we, our” to the singular “I.” The two specific examples that he next presents both focus attention on the mixture of the earthly and heavenly in his ministry.

13, Jesus as Authoritative Teacher

13 ascended ... came down ... is in.—We must understand the Lord’s words at two levels.

1. Most immediately, he is claiming immediate, personal access to heaven, and thus knowledge of the heavenly mechanisms that underlie the birth from above. The only one who can credibly claim such access is one who has himself descended from heaven. Isa 14:13 reminds us that it is blasphemy for a mere creature to claim to make such an ascent. How about Elijah in 2 Kings 2? The repeated testimony of the text there is that he was **taken** up by God. He did not have the ability or authority to **ascend** on his own to access heavenly mysteries.
2. There is a deeper meaning to his words. He is echoing an OT passage, Prov 30:4, with great relevance to this passage.
 - a. “Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?” This is the link to the present discussion. Jesus has claimed to be the one who ascended and descended.
 - b. “Who hath gathered the wind in his fists?” In Proverbs, this and the next clause point to the creative power of God. In this chapter, the Lord has already used the the mysterious workings of the wind to illustrate how no man can understand where and when the Spirit will move. By alluding to Prov 30, he is claiming that he, by contrast, controls the wind, and thus the Spirit. He not only understands how the Spirit moves, but directs it to move.
 - c. “Who hath bound the waters in a garment?” The Lord has also alluded to water as an element of the heavenly birth, referring to the cleansing from sin that takes place. Now he presents himself as the one who controls the water, the only one who can provide true cleansing from sin. Compare Heb 9:13,14.

- d. “Who hath established all the ends of the earth?” This is a claim to be the creator; cf. 1:3.
- e. “What *is* his name, and what *is* his son's name, if thou canst tell?” The passage in Proverbs is clearly focusing on the creator, and posing the prophetic riddle, “Who is his son?” Now the Lord Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man, a messianic title (Dan 7:13), and claims in effect to be the one who controls the working of the Spirit in the lives of his creatures.

Thus as a teacher, the Lord claims access to much deeper truths than Nicodemus has, truths accessible only in heaven.

14-15, Jesus as Exalted Savior

14 as Moses lifted up the serpent.—The reference is to the episode in Num 21:5-9. A sinful people, suffering justly for their sin, are delivered by the divine provision of an object for their faith. Their deliverance has nothing to do with their innocence (they were all guilty) or their good works (they were not required to do anything). It required only that they recognize their problem and fix their attention on the designated answer.

So must the Son of Man.—Here the Lord presents himself, not as Moses, but as the serpent!

Lifted up.—This verb *upsow* is extremely interesting in this context. Everywhere else in the NT, it means “exalt,” with a positive sense. In Acts, it repeatedly refers to our Lord’s ascension (2:33; 5:31). Yet in John it clearly refers to the Lord’s crucifixion (here, see 12:32,33). This combination of details suggests two insights that we should draw from this passage.

1. Our Lord viewed the cross as a noble mission. He approached it with joy (Heb 12:2), and saw it as an integral part of his glorification (13:31; 17:1-4).
2. The death of Christ is inseparable from his resurrection and ascension. Saving faith must be fixed not just on Christ crucified, but on Christ crucified, risen, and interceding for us at the Father’s right hand.

15 that.—Here is the purpose for Christ’s passion: to make salvation accessible by faith. His miracles do not do this; those who believe on the basis of his miracles (like Nicodemus) are not acceptable to him, 2:23-25. Faith is needed, but it must be properly grounded, on the passion of Christ (v.14) and in recognition of his exalted person (v.13).

whosoever believeth.—Our Lord’s words to Nicodemus so far have been calculated to raise a sense of uncertainty in Nicodemus’ heart. The Lord has described the inadequacy of his confession in v.2 and the need for a movement of God’s Spirit from above. Now the Lord gives him a promise to which he can cling: all who are believing will have eternal life.

We must note three things about this belief.

1. Its *object*. Note the parallel between the faith here required and the story of the brazen serpent. There, the faith consisted in looking at the serpent, in obedience to God’s command. Our faith must similarly be properly directed if it is to have the desired effect.
2. Its *duration*. It is described as an ongoing process, not a point decision. This is always the case in the great promise verses of the NT. We are never told, “If you believed, you will be saved.” Always it is, “those who are believing,” present tense, and usually as a

participle, emphasizing an ongoing state, not an action that one takes at a point in time. Compare 1:12; 5:24; 6:35; 7:38. Salvation is promised to those who are believing, not to those who at some time in the past made a statement of belief and then fell away. There is such a thing as temporary belief, Luke 8:13, but such belief cannot save.

3. Its *origin*. 1:13 shows that such a belief initiates in the will of God, not in the initiative of man. Compare Paul in Eph 2:8-9 and 2 Cor 4:6. It is true that we are commanded to believe, 1 John 3:23. But we should realize that people are powerless in our unsaved sinful state to obey this commandment, and true obedience requires the intervention of God's spirit. We must give them the facts they need to understand, then pray that God would work in their hearts to produce the needed faith. Pressure from us to pray a prayer or sign a card is very unlikely to produce true faith.

should.—There is no doubt associated with this term. The subjunctive is virtually required after the particle *hina* “in order that.” The purpose of the Lord's suffering is not to give an example of selfless love, or to show us how wicked the world is, but to make full salvation available to every one who will receive it.

eternal life.—This is the first instance in John of another typical Johannine phrase. The phrase occurs 14x in John, 2x in 1 John, and only 17x in all the rest of Scripture. The expression has its origin in Dan 12:1-2, which takes the reader to the end of this present age.

- Michael “stands back,” not “stands up.” The reference is to the action described in 2 Thess 2:7. Michael is currently restraining the wrath of the world against Israel, but his protection will be withdrawn.
- The “time of trouble” is the time of “great tribulation” described in the Olivet Discourse.
- Then “thy people shall be delivered” by the coming of the Messiah as described in Zech 14.
- There follows the resurrection of the dead to enter the eternal state, as described in Rev. 20.

By using this term, the Lord is emphasizing the shallowness of Nicodemus' original confession that he is merely a “teacher come from God.” The Lord is not just another itinerant Rabbi. He is the promised Messiah, come to offer the great eschatological blessings of the Messianic age, through the paradoxical means of his own death and resurrection. Cf. 3:3 “kdom of God”

An echo of 1:12. Note here, as always, that “believe” is in the present tense. Salvation is promised to those who are believing, not to those who at some time in the past made a statement of belief and then fell away.

16-22, The Evangelist's Commentary

Reasons for identifying a shift in the speaker at this point:

- shift in temporal perspective. The Lord anticipates his sacrifice in the future in 3:14 (“must be lifted up”), but 3:16 speaks of God's gift in the past.
- The vocabulary is distinctive to the evangelist, but not to our Lord.

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- Christ never describes himself as “only begotten,” but this is a common expression for John (1:14, 18; 1 John 4:9).
- “believe on the name,” 18
- “do the truth,” 21

- Strong parallels to 3:33-36 and 1:5-10 (see table), which are not spoken by Christ.

This would be consistent with a chiasmic organization with the introduction to this section, 2:23-25, which was a commentary on the receptiveness of people to the Lord and the true state of their hearts.

Comparison with 3:33-36 and 1:5-10 (see the table) suggests that this falls into two parts.

- 16-18 covers the same themes as the evangelist’s response to the baptist’s testimony in 33-36. Thus it draws our attention to the contrast between the learned but spiritual ignorant Nicodemus in the first half of the chapter, and the rustic but spiritual Baptist in the second half.
- 19-21 recalls 1:5-10. It is a hinge between this section and the next. It explains the use of “condemn” in 17, 18 and thus motivates the need for belief; and it also sets up the final testimony of John, which we hear in 22ff.

Prolog	Summary of 3:1-21	Summary of 3:22-36
<p>1:4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.</p> <p>1:12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:</p> <p>1:14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.</p>	<p>3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. 18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.</p>	<p>3:34 For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure <i>unto him</i>. 35 The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand. 36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.</p>
<p>5 And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. 8 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. 9 <i>That</i> was the true Light, which lighteth every man, coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.</p>	<p>19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. 21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.</p>	<p>31 He that cometh from above [Jesus] is above all: he that is of the earth [the Baptist] is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all. 32 And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth [Jesus, 3:11]; and no man receiveth his testimony. 33 He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.</p>

16-18, Reconciliation of the Lord’s Claims

Our Lord’s final words to Nicodemus base his claims on two OT passages:

- From Prov 30:4, he is the Son of God, with access to heaven, in control of the wind and water, emblems of the Spirit's work.
- From Num 21:5-9, he is the brazen serpent, lifted up as the object of his people's faith to save them from death.

The juxtaposition of these two images is striking. John now seeks to show how they are compatible. Notice how he weaves together the themes from both of them.

- From Prov 30:4, he takes the notion of the Son of God. Previously, we have heard the Lord described in this way (1:34, 49), but there the term was used as the Messianic title familiar from 2 Sam 7 and Psa 2, the title of the Davidic king. Prov 30:4 is different. It suggests that there is someone who shares more directly in the creative prerogatives of deity. This may explain why John introduces his term "only-begotten," to distinguish this sense of the sonship of our Lord.
- From Num 21 he takes the notions of a sinful and perishing people, graciously delivered from their condemnation.

Now consider the elements of these verses. In particular, in 16 we have

- New material about loving and giving
 - Two verbs, each with an object.
- A repetition of what was said at the end of 15.

Repetition of 15b.—This repetition establishes the parallel with 15 and shows that what is being described in God's giving up of his son, and what is prophesied in the serpent on the pole, are different perspectives on one and the same event.

In particular, note "not perish." The Lord very gently inserted this warning into 15.

- It is consistent with his use of the episode of the brazen serpent, which dealt with a judgment on Israel.
- It is presented very gently, as a negative, "not perish," but will become positive by v.18.
- This is a model for how we ought to warn people of the consequences of sin—not avoiding the question, but leading them gently to see their problem. We will observe the development of this theme in these verses and on through the book.

16, world.—As we noted in our comments on 1:10, in John this is a term of *quality* and not of *quantity*. It refers to a system that is arranged in an orderly fashion, and thus to the created order (1:19; 11:9). Because of sin, it has become corrupt. Here are some of its uses in John:

- It does not know the Father, 1 John 3:1, and cannot receive the Spirit of truth, 14:17.
- It lies in wickedness, 1 J 5:19.
- Its works are evil, and therefore it hates the Lord, 7:7, and his disciples, 15:18, 1 J 3:13, whom it will persecute, 16:33.
- It is under judgment, with its evil prince, Satan, 12:31, cf. 14:30; 16:8-11.
- It needs saving, 12:47; 1 J 4:14

- It is characterized by ungodly lust, with which the believer is to have nothing to do, 1 John 2:15-17.

This is the world into which our Savior came, and in which we live. Not surprisingly, “the world knew him not” (1:10).

God so loved.—This is a striking statement, when we understand the meaning of “world.” John makes clear that we are not to love it, using exactly the same phrase that he uses here (1 John 2:15). And in general, God “hate[s] all workers of iniquity,” Psa 5:5. He abhors the covetous, Psa 10:3. His soul hates the wicked and the lover of violence, Psa 11:5. Prov 6:16-19 enumerates the seven things that the Lord hates, the last of which is a person (“he that soweth discord among brethren”). Yet here we learn that God loves the world. How are we to reconcile these statements?

The trick is to recognize two characteristics of the world as a sinful system. The key is Rom 8:18-22. Paul here does not use *kosmos*, but *ktisis* “creation,” yet the link between the two is very strong: the *kosmos* is an orderly system just because it has been created. Cf. Rom 1:20, *ktisew* *kosmou* “creation of the world.”

1. It includes more than just the people. “The creature was made subject to vanity” (Rom 8:20). “The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom 8:22). The sin of humans had an effect on the entire creation.
2. It is temporary. “The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. ... The creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom 8:19, 21).

The statement that “God loved the world” is an echo of Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31. As it came from his hand, it was perfect. He looked upon it with the satisfaction of a craftsman. Though marred by sin, he sees in it what he originally made it to be, as well as what he will make of it when redemption is complete.

Why can he love the world but we cannot? Because his love is creative and redemptive; he can love it for what it was when he created it, and what it will be when redemption is complete. We can only love it for what it is now.

He gave his only begotten son.—Both the verb “gave” and the adjective “only-begotten” emphasize the sacrifice that is being described. The distinctive Son of God anticipated in Prov 30:4 becomes the serpent lifted up of Num 21.

only begotten son.—Only John uses this term to describe the relation of Jesus to the Father. The Greek word, *monogenēs*, is the reflex of the Hebrew *yaxid*, which means “only, unique.” Both terms tend to be used in settings that emphasize that a parent is being deprived of their only offspring, and their line will thus be cut off:

- Judg 11:34, Jephthah’s daughter
- Luke 7:12, the son of the widow of Nain
- Luke 8:42, Jairus’ daughter
- Luke 9:38, a man’s only son, possessed by a demon

- References in the OT to the death of a *yaxid* as provoking particularly intense mourning: Jer 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zech 12:10

There is probably a special focus here on the first use of *yaxid* in the OT, to describe Isaac's relation to Abraham in Gen 22:2, 12, 16. Though Isaac was not technically Abraham's only son (Ishmael having been born previously), in the previous chapter Abraham sends Ishmael away, and so Isaac is the only one through whom the line will come.

Interestingly, the LXX translates yaxid in Gen 22 with agap8tos "beloved" rather than monogen8s, perhaps because of Ishmael, but Josephus (Ant 1.222) and the writer to Hebrews (11:17) both use monogen8s. It's worth noting that the other gospels refer to Jesus as God's "beloved" son (Matt 3:17; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35), probably in reference to the LXX of Gen 22. The other gospels use the term "son" huio8 qeou to include not only Jesus but also believers (Matt 5:9; Luke 20:36), while John reserves that term for Jesus and calls believers only tekna qeou.

Thus by calling Jesus God's "onlybegotten son," John is describing the terrible price that is entailed in his sacrifice.

He gave his son.—The combination of "to give" plus "son" is potent. It is used in two ways in the Greek Bible.

1. To give a son in answer to a request: Gen 30:6 (Dan to Rachel); 1 Kings 3:6; 5:7; 1 Chr 28:5; 2 Chr 2:12 (Solomon to David); 1 Chr 25:5 (sons of Heman), Isa 9:6 (a descendant of the nation becomes its ruler). But then the son belongs to the recipient. Here, the son belongs to the donor.
2. To deliver up to someone's control. Once (1 Kings 17:19) this is for protection, but mostly it is for destruction, usually in punishment for sin: this is the closest parallel.
 - a. Judg 11:30: Jephthah asks God to deliver the children of Ammon into his hands
 - b. Judg 20:13; the tribes of Israel ask Benjamin to hand over the sons of Belial who are responsible for the rape of the Levite's concubine
 - c. 2 Kings 6:28,29, two women argue about giving up their sons to eat because of the famine in Samaria
 - d. Jer 18:21, because of the resistance of the people to God's word, Jeremiah prays that their children may be given up to famine.

Thus the import of the phrase is that he delivered up his son to death. "Gave up" or "delivered up" would be better than simply "gave." Paul may have this verse in mind in Rom 8:32, "he that spared not his own son, but delivered him up [παραδιδωμι] for us all."

17 God sent ... his son.—Lest we should think that the son was taken from the Father by forces beyond his control, John reminds us that God sent his son deliberately and purposefully.

Note the difference in language with 1:6. John was also sent, but as a man; Christ was sent as a son, with the authority that entailed.

The passage is reminiscent of the parable in Matt 21:37 (parallels Mark 12, Luke 20) about a landowner who sent his son to receive the rents owed him. Are there OT parallels to this notion

of a king sending his son, from which the Lord may be drawing here? Maybe the Joseph story in Gen 37:13, 14; 45:7, 8.

- Jacob must have known of the animosity between Joseph and the brothers, but the mission he gave his favorite son was one of blessing, not condemnation. Cf. 37:14.
- Jacob could not have known of the larger purpose that God had for sending Joseph to Dothan, but Joseph himself later became aware of this purpose, 45:7,8.

Not ... to condemn the world.—The theme of judgment that first surfaced in “not perish” in v.15 here emerges again. It is still very gentle, stated in the negative, but adds an important insight. When perishing does happen, it is not meaningless noise in a random universe (modern humanism), nor the capricious pranks of evil demons (much oriental religion), but the righteous judgment of a holy God.

Here we read that he came not to condemn (judge) the world, yet 5:22, 27, 30 indicate that the Son is in fact the agent of judgment. These two are reconciled in 12:47, 48. The distinction is one of time. His first coming was to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (cf. Heb. 9:26-28). When he comes again, it will be with judgment for those who have not received his salvation (1 Thes 5:2,3; 2 Thes 1:6-9).

18, He that believeth.—This is the third time in this chapter (14, 16) and in the book that we encounter the present participle of “believe.” It occurs only 26x in the entire Greek Bible, and 17 of those are in John (14) or 1 John (3). This message, first enunciated to Nicodemus, is the heart of what John learned from the Savior, and what he summarized as the conclusion of his gospel in 20:31.

Those who believe continuously (not as a point event as in 2:23), as a work of God’s spirit (and not a reasoned political decision), are delivered from judgment.

He that believeth not.—This half of the verse carries two lessons.

1. There is no alternative to belief. Some would say, “He that believeth is saved, but so is he that is sincere in some other belief.” No—belief in Christ is both sufficient (18a) and necessary (18b).
2. The condemnation is itself grounded in the revelation of Christ. One could identify lots of reasons for God to condemn people, many sins that might draw down his wrath. But after the advent of the Messiah, the one that outweighs all the others is rejection of the salvation that God has offered. Compare 16:9: the HS will convict the world of judgment “because they believe not on me.” Go back to the story of the brazen serpent. Why did the people die? There are at least three causes.
 - a. Because they murmured against the Lord.
 - b. Because the poisonous snakes bit them.
 - c. Because they did not avail themselves of the cure God offered through the brazen serpent.

Rejection of the divinely provided cure (c) is evidence of the underlying rebellion (a).

19-21, Introduction of the Witness

Now John develops further this idea that the men's condemnation is based on their rejection of what Christ has done, using ideas from 1:5-10. And just as that section went on to introduce the witness of John the Baptist, so the evangelist uses these ideas here to lead up to his final description of the Baptist.

19 Light is come into the world.—Compare 1:5,9. In the creation metaphor of ch. 1, the incarnation of Christ is compared to the creation of light on the first day of creation. His holy life and pure teaching were a moral sunrise. Maybe John has in mind Mal. 4:2, which compares the coming of Christ to the sunrise.

Men loved darkness rather than light.—Compare 1:5b, 10. Chapter 1 did not discuss why the darkness did not comprehend the light, but John now makes the motive clear. They do not want their evil deeds to be revealed.

Verses 20-21 spell this out explicitly.

- Evil-doers shun the light to avoid having attention drawn to their wicked deeds. They think they can avoid shame by hiding their sin. Interestingly, their very efforts show that they are aware of their wickedness, and that is the greatest condemnation of all! Compare the argument of Rom 2, based on internal standard of a person's own conscience.
- A righteous person delights to have his godly deeds illuminated. "Wrought in God" may simply mean that these are godly deeds. But other passives with "in God" appear to use it to name the agent of the action: Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1 "my horn is exalted *en qew*," Jude 1, "those that are sanctified *en qew patri*," so this may indeed be the intention here.

Comparison with 1:5-10 shows that this latter case is not just a general principle, but a reference to a specific individual, the divinely ordained Witness, John the Baptist. The evangelist is about to tell us a concluding story about the Baptist, and v.21 serves to introduce him. The Baptist's deeds were indeed "wrought in God," the result of God's specific direction (1:6, 33), and the Baptist was definitely drawn to the Lord, seeking to support and promote his program at every turn.

Notes

Dunamai in John

See associated spreadsheet.

"Wrought in God"

What does "wrought in God" mean? What is the sense of the adverbial *en qew*? Other instances of adverbial *en qew*:

- Hannah 1 Sam 2:1, "my horn is exalted *en qew*," note passive verb.
- Children of Israel in 1 Chron 5:25, "they transgressed *en qew*."
- 1 Sam 14:14, "and David made inquiry *en qew*"
- Hos 12:7, God as object of our turning
- Rom 2:17, "make boast *en qew*"

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- Jude 1, “those that are sanctified *en qew patri*,” again passive verb.

So with passive verbs, *en* appears to be agentive. How about *en kuriw*?

- Object of inquiry: (cf. 1 Sam 14:14) Jud 20:23, 28; 1 Sam 10:22; 2 Sam 2:1
- Object of an oath Jud 21:7, 1 Sam 24:22; 2 Sam 19:8; ; 1 Ki 1:17, 30; 2:8;
- Object of trust, 2 Ki 18:5; 2 Chr 20:20; Phil 2:19
- One offended in transgression, 2 Chr 26:16
- Hos 1:7, God will save Israel *en kuriw qew autwn*
- Heart strengthened (passive) 1 Sam 2:1; 30:6 (note reflexive in Hebrew); Odes 3:1; eph 6:10 (passive but impv)
- One person strengthens another *en kuriw*, 1 Sam 23:16; Zech 10:12 (subj Lord); cf. Zech 12:5; exhort 1 Thes 4:1; 2 Thes 3:12
- Persuaded by the Lord (passive), rom 14:14,; active Gal 5:10; Phil 2:24; 2 thes 3:4
- Receive s.o. Rom 16:2; Phil 2:29
- Greet so Rom 16:8, 22; 1 Cor 16:19
- Labor, work rom 16:12 (bis), 1 Cor 9:1; 1 Cor 15:58
- Election Rom 16:13
- Glory 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17
- Faithful 1 Cor 4:17
- Called 1 Cor 7:22
- Married (passive), 1 Cor 7:39
- Door opened 2 Cor 2:12 (passive)
- Testify, Eph 4:17
- Obey, Eph 6:1
- Rejoice Phil 3:1; 4:4, 10; Phm 1:20
- Stand fast Phil 4:1; 1 Thes 3:8
- Be of same mind Phil 4:2
- Receive a ministry Col 4:17
- Supervise 1 Thes 5:12
- Beloved Phm 16
- Die Rev 14:13