Life has many important questions. What am I going to do with my life? Who will I marry? Where will I live? Where will I go to school? But perhaps it was Nicodemus who asked life’s most important question: “how can anyone be born after having grown old?” (John 3:4)

Let’s think of the circumstances that led up to this question. The Bible tells us there was a man named Nicodemus who came one night to see Jesus. This man had quite a biography. He was “a Pharisee” and “a leader of the Jews.” Even though we Christians have a somewhat negative association with the Pharisees, they were known for their meticulous study and application of God’s law. And Nicodemus, being “a leader of the Jews” suggests that he may have been a member of the ruling council, before whom Jesus appeared on trial. As scholars point out, in both cases, therefore, Nicodemus found himself in the midst of people who should have been better than they were and who were viciously opposed to Jesus.

Jesus informs us that Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night,” and that is generally understood as a negative detail about the man. Coming “by night” may have indicated his fear of being identified with Jesus. In addition, we also note here that the narrative includes the same detail when we see Nicodemus again at the time of Jesus’ burial (John 19:30). And recalling John’s symbolic use of light and dark, this element of Nicodemus’ story suggests an unfavorable spiritual condition.

However, because of his greeting Nicodemus evidently had respect for Jesus. But since Nicodemus does not begin with a question or a request, we aren’t really sure why he came to Jesus. But he came!

Now, the connection between Nicodemus’ question and Jesus’ response is not immediately clear. Jesus simply volunteers the subject of the kingdom of God, as well as the imagery of “being born from above.” Scholars remind us that the underlying Greek adverb can be translated “from above,” “again,” or “anew.” Each fits appropriately in this context.

At this point, Jesus and Nicodemus are hardly on the same page. Nicodemus is thinking literally and physically, while Jesus is speaking symbolically and spiritually. Consequently, Nicodemus is in the dark about the meaning of Jesus’ words.

Jesus reiterates that “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (verse 3), and that “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (verse 4).
The water and flesh (verse 6) represent the physical birth that Nicodemus has in mind. While the work of the Spirit, produces the birth that Jesus has in mind. Jesus’ reference to being born of water has often been interpreted as meaning baptism. But within the context of this passage about the mother’s womb and Jesus’ subsequent comparison of being born of flesh and being born of spirit, it is more likely that the water image refers to our physical birth. Therefore, the work of the Spirit produces the birth Jesus has in mind.

Now, somewhat surprisingly, Jesus reprimands Nicodemus for his failure to understand. This credentialed “teacher of Israel” is a real disappointment. Simply stated, he is unable to converse about heavenly, spiritual matters.

Right here, we are reminded of the importance of testimony. As scholars observe, the gospel truth is not something worked out philosophically by an individual. Rather, it is revealed truth, rooted in historical events, and passed down by testimony from eyewitnesses.

John then speaks of Jesus’ unique role as “the one who descended from heaven.” Consequently, Jesus’ testimony about heavenly things is unmatched and totally reliable. In the larger view of John, this also indicates the preexistent divinity of Christ.

Jesus continues on by making reference to a short story from Israel’s generation of wandering in the wilderness. The story (Numbers 21:4-9) describes a plague of poisonous snakes that had tormented the Israelite camp. The people who had been bitten by the snake were dying, and so there was natural panic throughout the camp. When Moses prayed for help, God’s answer was to fashion a bronze image of a snake and hang it on a pole in the center of the camp. The Lord promised that anyone who had been bitten could look at the serpent on a pole and live.

And we are told that Jesus identified himself with that serpent on a pole in the wilderness. The “lifted up” parallel anticipates the cross. The glorious implication is that we who are snake bitten by sin will find healing in looking to the One on the cross.

Of course, the key verse in today’s scripture lesson is John 3:16, and this verse is probably the most familiar and memorized verse in the entire Bible. In just a few words, we understand God’s purpose in sending Jesus, the intended response and the eternal result.

Hear it again, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“You want to know how you can be born from above,” Nicodemus? Here it is: “God so loved the world.” This is the crux of it. Love provided a way for us to be delivered from our sin. Love stepped into the picture and provided a Gift, Jesus! And Love stated that if anyone of us believe in that Gift, God’s Son, we will experience salvation and eternal life.

But please note that “believe” here is more than intellectual assent to the claims of Christ. It means actively placing our lives and trust in complete surrender to the One in whom we believe.
Our Patron Saint

The people of Jesus’ day thought of the Pharisees as extremely righteous. They were considered “expert” in knowing and understanding the laws of God, and they were most careful about obeying them. They were not necessarily loved, but they were respected.

The people in our time, however, have a very different impression of the Pharisees. We view them as the worst kind of legalists: self-righteous and hypocritical. And most of what we know about them comes from Jesus’ harsh critiques of them.

As scholars note, the first is that the Pharisees were a mixed bag. Their legalism was probably an unfortunate mutation of an earlier earnestness. They should have been better than they were, and Jesus called them on it.

As you recall, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. And he should have been better than he was. He was a leader and a teacher. Yet, he was too timid to come to Jesus in the daylight and was over his head in talking about spiritual matters. He was full of questions and confusion and we never sense that he came to any real clarity.

We are reminded, however, that we shouldn’t be too quick to condemn Nicodemus, for he is a kindred spirit. He is the patron saint of all those who ought to be better than they are. And chances are we know that includes us.

Perhaps we sense that we should be better than we are in that our generosity is out of proportion to our blessings, our living falls short of our understanding, and our actions betray our commitment.

Scholars point out that since the Fall, we human beings have been underperforming. Made in the image of God, yet preferring to believe the serpent, we have not lived up to our Creator’s design. Therefore, we must not be too hard on Nicodemus, for in reality, he is one of us and we are all in this together.

The Math of the Kingdom

Jesus says that “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). And then a moment later, he says that “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (3:5).

Now, these two verses are the only times in the entire Gospel of John that Jesus uses the phrase, “the kingdom of God.” And his only other reference to “kingdom” at all in John comes when he is on trial before Pilate and he asserts that his “kingdom is not of this world” (18:36).

At the same time, scholars inform us, that this is the only reference in all of Jesus’ teachings to this image of being born again, or anew, or from above.
It seems from Nicodemus’ response that he interpreted Jesus to mean “again,” for he asked about entering “a second time into his mother’s womb” (3:4). He understood it to be a second, an “again” birth.

When Jesus rephrased his teaching about entering the kingdom, however, he replaced the original adverb with the phrase “born of water and Spirit” (3:5). He also echoed Nicodemus’ word “enter,” but redirected it. Therefore, the issue is not about entering a womb, but entering the kingdom of God. It is not going back but is moving forward.

So it is that there is a kingdom that is not of this world (18:36), and entering it requires a birth that is not of this world. It is a new birth!

**Trinitarian Salvation**

One of the great pluses of John’s Gospel is its attentiveness to the Trinity, though that word is never mentioned. But John definitely offers us a glimpse into the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Scholars inform us that in this brief passage we see how each person of the Trinity is at work in our salvation.

The role of the Father is hinted at immediately in Nicodemus’ insight about Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God…” (3:2). The “Rabbi” and “teacher” labels point out an incomplete understanding of who Jesus is, of course, but Nicodemus was right that Jesus had come from God. And Jesus states that explicitly when he declares in verse 16 that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” When we focus on our salvation at its origin, we will always find ourselves at the heart of the Father.

Jesus also reveals the work of the Son to Nicodemus, and it goes way beyond rabbi and teacher. Jesus points back to that story from Israel’s wilderness era of the serpent on the pole. That story suggests a malady, a remedy from God, a cross, and a cure that is attained by faith. Faith in the Son is the key to eternal life.

Finally, we recognize that new life begins with a new birth. And that birth is the work of the Spirit. Jesus acknowledged the mysterious nature of the Spirit’s work in verse 8 of our scripture lesson.

Thus, we are told that the Father sent the Son because of love for the world. The Son became the prescription on a pole in order that we might be saved and have eternal life. And while the Father sent the Son once, and the Son was lifted up once, the Spirit is continuously doing a work in our lives.

Bottom line, it is God for us (Father), God with us (Son), and God in us (Holy Spirit).

Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3).
Action Plan

1. What does Jesus teach about how one enters God’s kingdom?
2. What evidence in this scripture lesson do we see of how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work in concert to bring about our salvation?

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