

# The Teacher from Heaven Instructs the Teacher of Israel

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## **Text:**

John 2:23-3:21

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

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."

## Introduction:

John is an Apostle and an Evangelist, but he is also an artist. The discourses of his Gospel are like intricately composed paintings in which every detail is meaningful and important. The job of the interpreter of John's Gospel is not unlike that of a museum guide who points out to us significant details in a work of art that we might not notice on our own. Not knowing those details may not keep us from appreciating and enjoying the work we are observing, but knowing them will deepen our appreciation and enable us to grasp more clearly the truth that the artist is trying to communicate. My goal is to help make this passage come to life for you so that we might receive from it that spiritual life that it was originally written to communicate.

Before getting to the passage itself, let's set the scene. First of all, there is a reason why we read the end of chapter 2. It establishes the context for the introduction of Nicodemus. It is a summary of the reaction of the people of Jerusalem to his first visit to the city. Many had believed in him, but their faith was imperfect, short of what is necessary, so Jesus had not committed to them. Nicodemus is one of those who had an imperfect faith. Notice the link between "many believed in his name because of the signs he did" in 2:24, and what Nicodemus says to Jesus in verse 2: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God, for no man can do these signs which you do unless God is with him." By saying "we" instead of "I" Nicodemus speaks not only for himself, but also for the crowds that had been impressed with Jesus. What he means by a "teacher sent from God", however, is far less than what Jesus will lead him to understand in verse 13 when he says: "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." Nicodemus takes Jesus to be one of the miracle-working rabbis of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism, but Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man who comes down from heaven prophesied in Daniel 7.

Secondly, we should notice the importance of the teacher motif. The teacher is the communicator of truth, the one who instructs us. Nicodemus addresses Jesus as "Rabbi" an exalted Hebrew term for teacher, and calls him a "teacher sent from God." In the middle of the passage Jesus rebukes Nicodemus by saying: "You hold the office of teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things." Both are teachers, one an official teacher of Israel, but the other The Teacher come directly from God. Nicodemus, as an official teacher of Israel, had the duty of understanding and expounding the Scriptures to the people, but Jesus is amazed that he, himself, does not understand those Scriptures, especially as they pertain to the message of God's promised salvation. Nicodemus' misunderstanding of the Scriptures and his

failure to understand how God is now acting to bring salvation to the world gives Jesus the opportunity to explain God's salvation as it is unfolding before Nicodemus' eyes.

A couple of more details and then we will look at the text. First, as we have pointed out, Jesus keeps insisting that Nicodemus should understand what he is saying; the reason he should is because he is the teacher of Israel and as such he should know the Scriptures. Everything Jesus is saying is rooted in the Scriptures. It should not have caught Nicodemus by surprise. Secondly, the passage divides into two parts, two scenes. The first is a dialogue in which Nicodemus asks three questions prompted by Jesus' declaration: "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." The second is a monologue where Nicodemus having played his role fades into the background as Jesus gives a clear and detailed answer to his third and final question: "How can these things be?" We may summarize the two sections with two imperatives indicated by the repetition of the word "must". In the first Jesus says to Nicodemus: "You must be born again"; in the second he says of himself in answer to Nicodemus' question: "how can these things be?" "The Son of Man must be lifted up." Once we have understood these two "musts", we will have understood the essence of the passage, but more importantly, we will have understood the essence of how we are saved.

## I. "You Must Be Born Again"

No sooner had Nicodemus gotten , what he thought was a compliment to Jesus, out of his mouth than Jesus replies to him with words that leave him puzzled and confused. Jesus tells him that he must be born again if he wants to see God's Kingdom. This establishes the theme of the entire passage. The question behind everything contained in this passage is: "How can we have eternal life?" Here Jesus speaks of seeing the kingdom of God. Later he will speak of having eternal life. The two are synonyms. Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he hopes to see God's Kingdom or to have eternal life he must first be born again. Nicodemus takes this in a completely literal way and sees it as an impossibility. Jesus then explains to him that he was not speaking of physical birth, but of spiritual birth, birth that is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, he tells him that he should have known this.

The idea of new birth would not have been totally unfamiliar to Nicodemus. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century when a Gentile converted to Judaism he was baptized and after his baptism he was said to be as one newly born. For the Jews this meant that he was now born as a Jew. For Nicodemus and his contemporaries this was what was important, to be born a son of Abraham. This made them a part of the covenant people and the object of God's salvation. Jesus is telling him that this is not enough, that he must be given spiritual life if he is to have any hope of being saved. Furthermore, he tells him that this should not surprise him; that he should know it implying

that it had been prophesied in the very Scriptures that he was considered to the teacher. What Jesus implies is true. The Old Testament prophets had foreseen that in the times of the Messiah God would pour out his Spirit, not just upon Israel, but upon all humanity, bringing the double blessing of forgiveness and new life. One of the most striking examples of such a prophecy is found in Ezekiel 36:24-27:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 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.

This passage is, no doubt, the background of what Jesus says in verse 5: “except ye be born of water and of the Spirit”. Water in the messianic context of the passage is probably a reference to John’s baptism, a baptism of repentance, and Spirit is a reference to the spiritual regeneration brought about by the work of Christ. This is paralleled by what John the Baptist says in 1:33: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”. Nicodemus had, most likely, as most of the Pharisees, refused to submit to the baptism of John because he considered that he was already a child of the covenant and hence of God’s Kingdom having need neither of repentance nor of new life. He had been born a child of Abraham that was sufficient.

## II. The Son of Man Must be Lifted Up

Once Nicodemus understands the need of spiritual rebirth, he asks the question that we should ask once we have understood our need of salvation and new life: “How can these things be?” Jesus’ answer is based on an Old Testament image, the brass serpent that God had instructed Moses to make in the wilderness as a source of healing for those who had been bitten by serpents in order that they might live. Jesus says: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him might have eternal life.” The key to understanding what Jesus is saying here is the verb “lifted up”. Later in the book Jesus will use it on two other occasions. On the third occasion in chapter 12 as he approaches the hour of his death He says: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die” (John 12:32-33). Here he clearly signifies that his being lifted up signifies his being lifted up on the cross. It refers to more than just his death on the cross, however. It is also the verb that is used elsewhere to speak of his being “lifted up”, or exalted to the right hand of the Father. It includes the entire

work of Christ necessary for the salvation of sinners of which his death, his being lifted up on the cross is the beginning.

Two other terms in John's Gospel are used in close connection with it and refer to the same thing: his "hour", and his "work". Jesus finishes the work that the Father has sent him to accomplish by coming to, and facing the "hour" for which he came into the world. That work is his being lifted up. His specific responsibility in facing his hour, in accomplishing his work, was to submit to the cross, to allow himself to be lifted up. This was voluntary on his part. He says: "No man takes my life from me, I lay it down of myself" (John 10:18). Once Jesus had submitted to the cross, had laid down his life for us by allowing himself to be lifted up on the cross, then the Father raised him from the dead and lifted him up to his own right hand. He then sent the Holy Spirit to carry on the work that had begun in Jesus Christ. So Jesus' being lifted up includes all of God's work accomplished through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that makes our salvation possible: his death for us, his resurrection on the third day, his ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We can be born again. We can receive the gift of eternal life because the Son of Man who came down from heaven has been lifted up.

One final important thing needs to be pointed out in this passage. The way we receive the benefits of the salvation accomplished through the work of Jesus Christ is by believing in him. Nothing is clearer. Reread the passage and notice each time the verb "believe" is used. When we believe in Jesus we are born again, we receive the gift of eternal life. Nothing summarizes all of this better than the verse that is at the center of this passage. It is not surprising that it is the best known verse in the Bible:

"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" (John 3:16).