

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XXV : NICODEMUS AND THE NEW BIRTH

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
			2:23 - 3:21	

The scriptures as given by God contained no chapter / verse divisions and have been placed by others as a matter of convenience. These divisions are for reference primarily and are often a matter of opinion as to where sections divide. As an example of this, note Acts 21:40 and 22:1, which shows a verse / chapter division placed in the middle of a sentence. *This is not an error* but rather illustrates the true purpose of these divisions. “In 1250, Cardinal Hugo was the first to divide up the Bible into chapters; this he did for the purposes of a Latin concordance. The divisions, although very convenient for reference, are sometimes far from happily arranged. They have, however, been followed in every future translation. The division into verses was not made until three hundred years later.” [Collett, *All About the Bible*]

For today’s lesson, many of the commentators believe the chapter division would have best been placed after the end of John 2:22. I agree with these opinions, and the lesson will bear out the reasons why. “Though 2:23-25, in a sense, is a continuation of the preceding paragraph (for in both Jesus’ work in Jerusalem is described), yet the chapter division might have been made after verse 22. This becomes evident when the last verse of chapter 2 and the first verse of chapter 3 are read together.” [Hendriksen, *John*]

Another matter of opinion is the structure of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus: is all of the conversation the words of Christ or is part of it an explanation added by John? Hendriksen believes it all to be the words of Christ: “This lengthy paragraph may be divided into three sections: the first verse in which Nicodemus is introduced; verses 2-10, in which the he asks three questions and receives three answers; and verses 11-21, in which the dialogue becomes a discourse — Nicodemus having become a silent listener to the words of Jesus —, and information with respect to ‘earthly things’ is supplanted by teaching concerning ‘heavenly things’.” [Hendriksen, *John*] Others stop Jesus’ discourse with v15 and makes the rest to be additional notes added by John (which he was accustomed of doing, note 2:21,22). “The record consists of two parts. The first part (1-15) contains a summary of the actual conversation; the second gives the commentary of St. John (16- 21).” [Wescott, *John*] Which is correct is unimportant.

2:23 Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, : Jesus remained in Jerusalem for the entire week of the Passover Feast.

many believed in His name, when they saw the miracles which He did. : because of the miracles and the display of His power, many accepted Him as a great prophet or perhaps even the Messiah. “This, however, is not the same as saying that they surrendered their hearts to Him. Not all faith is saving faith.... Signs are done in order to strengthen true, saving faith (20:30,31). Of themselves they do not create faith. The Holy Spirit must do this. Moreover, once saving faith is present, one will believe in the word of Jesus even when there is no sign.” [Hendriksen, *John*] “They believed him to be the promised Messiah, but did not believe in him to the salvation of their souls: for we find, from the following verse, that their hearts were not at all changed, because our blessed Lord could not trust himself to them.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

2:24a But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, : “Note the contrast between *many trusted* (episteusan) and He was not trusting Himself (ouk episteuen) to them. Jesus did not look upon all these individuals as being true believers to whom His cause could be entrusted.” [Hendriksen, *John*] “The kind of repetition would be in some degree, though inadequately, expressed in English by ‘many trusted on His name ... but Jesus did not trust Himself to them’. “There is a kind of word-play between this and *believed*, in the preceding verse. Wycliffe reproduces it: ‘Jesus Himself *believed not Himself* to them.’ He did not trust His person to them. Tyndale, *put not Himself in their hands*. ‘He had no faith in their faith’ “ [Vincent, *Word Studies*] “It is necessary to consider not only whether we have faith in Christ but whether Christ has faith in us.” [Dods, *Gk NT*]

2:24b,25 because He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man. : This gives the reason why Jesus did not trust their professions, because as illustrated with His first encounter with Simon and Nathanael (1:42,47), and is about to be illustrated with Nicodemus, He knows what is in the hearts of everyone He meets. He does not require an external source to tell about another person. This is expressed here both positively (He knew all men) and negatively (He did not require another’s testimony). “Jesus knew all things; and why? Because He made all things, John 1:3, and because He was the all-wise God, John 1:1; and He knew all men, because He alone searches the heart, and tries the reins. He knows who are sincere, and who are hypocritical: He knows those in whom He can confide, and those to whom He can neither trust Himself nor His gifts. Reader, He also knows thee: thy cares, fears, perplexities, temptations, afflictions, desires, and hopes; thy helps and hindrances; the progress thou hast made in the Divine life, or thy declension from it. If He know thee to be hypocritical or iniquitous, He looks upon thee with abhorrence: if He know thee to be of a meek and broken spirit, He looks on thee with pity, complacency, and delight. Take courage-thou canst say, Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I do love thee, and mourn because I love and serve Thee so little: then expect Him to come in unto thee, and make His abode with thee: while thy eye and heart are simple, He will love thee, and thy whole soul shall be full of light. To Him be glory and dominion for ever!” [Clarke,

“The pronoun is emphatic. Christ knew ‘by Himself,’ ‘in virtue of His own power’.... This knowledge of the heart is elsewhere attributed to Jehovah (Jer 17:10; 20:12). Christ’s knowledge, as it is here described, was immediate (of Himself), universal (all men), complete (what was in man, i.e. the thoughts and feelings as yet unexpressed).” [Wescott, *John*] “The pronoun is expressed, and with a view to emphasis, as Rev., ‘He *himself* knew.’ ... No such characteristic as this was attributed to the gods of Paganism. ‘While, then, the gift of anything like general foreknowledge appears to be withheld from all the deities of invention, that of ‘the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart,’ is nowhere found; nor was it believed of any member of the Olympian community, as it was said of One greater than they, ‘He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man, for He knew what was in man,’” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: : Note the connection with the preceding: “He Himself knew what was in *man*. Now there was a *man* of the Pharisees named Nicodemus.” “The interview with Nicodemus is, apart from the important truth which it embodies, an illustration of Christ’s knowledge of what was in man. Godet truthfully observes that John reminds us by the word *man*, that Nicodemus was a specimen of the race which Jesus knew so well.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Quite a bit of information is available on this person who came to Jesus by night:

- *his name* was Nicodemus, meaning “victor over the people”. The name is Greek but it does not necessarily mean that he was a Greek since from the beginning of the Maccabean rulers there was an intermingling of Greek personal names with the Hebrew. Some give it a Hebrew derivation meaning “*innocent blood*.”
- *his religious affiliation and position* is given as a ruler of the Pharisees. This party’s grand beginning was a result of the separation from the secular spirit of Hellenism just prior to the Maccabees. During the centuries what had a good beginning became externalized, and *outward* conformity became the goal rather than emphasizing the internal reality. The doctrines they held were for the most part correct: man’s moral accountability and immortality, the providence of God, bodily resurrection, existence of angels / devils, and eternal rewards / punishments. Great men belonged to this group: Gamaliel, Paul, Josephus. They were particularly scrupulous concerning the Sabbath, and their man-made laws have become a standard point of jest; e.g.: a woman should not look in the mirror on the Sabbath lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out *which was work*; and one could *swallow* vinegar as a remedy for sore throat but could not use it as a gargle. According to John 3:10 he was a ruler or master in Israel, meaning he was part of the Sanhedrin; and 7:50 implies he was also a scribe (a professional student, interpreter, and teacher of the law).
- *his financial standing* might be implied from Jn 19:39 since only one well-off could have provided such a gift.
- *his age* (?) has been implied from verse 4 that he was an old man, but this may be reading too much into the verse.

3:2 The same came to Jesus by night, : there have been several reasons given for his coming to Jesus by night: the one which seems most popular is that of fear of the other rulers’ opinions. Considering John 19:38,39 this may be the reason. “On each occasion where Nicodemus is mentioned we may see other traces of the timidity to which it was due. He defended Jesus without expressing any personal interest in Him: he brought his offering only after Joseph of Arimathea had obtained the Body from Pilate.” [Wescott, *John*] “*By night*, ‘when Jewish superstition would keep men at home.’ He could reach Jesus’ apartment without being observed by the other inmates of the house, for an outside stair led to the upper room.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] “It must have been a mighty power of conviction, to break down prejudice so far as to lead this old Sanhedrist to acknowledge a Galilean, untrained in the Schools, as a Teacher come from God, and to repair to him for direction on, perhaps, the most delicate and important point in Jewish theology. But, even so, we cannot wonder that he should have wished to shroud his first visit in the utmost secrecy. It was a most compromising step for a Sanhedrist to take. With that first bold purgation of the Temple a deadly feud between Jesus and the Jewish authorities had begun, of which the sequel could not be doubtful.” [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*]

But others argue that this early in the ministry of Christ there was not the intense hatred which was evident in the latter part of the life of Christ, and that Nicodemus would have had no reason to be afraid to see Jesus at this time. Another possibility is that Nicodemus came at night just because he wanted time alone with the Lord and He was too busy throughout the days. “He had matters of the utmost importance, on which he wished to consult Christ; and he chose the night season, perhaps less through the fear of man than through a desire to have Jesus alone, as he found him all the day encompassed with the multitude; so that it was impossible for him to get an opportunity to speak fully on those weighty affairs concerning which he intended to consult him.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. : While it may have been in the mind of Nicodemus an act of condescension to talk with this Galilean teacher, he still was very mindful of his own position and who he thought Jesus was. Morris tells a story of an incident in a court of law: “A flamboyant figure strode to the witness box and was sworn in. He was instructed, ‘State your name,’ and replied, ‘Frank Lloyd Wright.’ ‘Occupation?’ ‘I am the world’s greatest living architect.’ Afterwards one of his friends said to him, ‘Frank, how could you say such a thing in court?’ To which he replied simply, ‘I had to. I was on oath.’” [Morris, *John*] Nicodemus may have had that attitude with Jesus: he was not coming to Him as to a superior or even to an equal, but as a Pharisee of high standing to a Galilean preacher. Nicodemus had to be polite but he knew (so he thought) where they both stood.

“We know”, meaning himself and the others mentioned in 2:23; 3:11. The reason being the signs which Jesus did.

The order places the emphasis of the sentence on the origin of Jesus' teaching. Literally, "we know that from God Thou hast come a teacher". Jesus had not studied in schools but obtained the right of a Rabbi from a higher Source.

3:3 Jesus answered and said unto him, : "Nicodemus has not asked any question. Nevertheless, Jesus *answers* him, for He read the question which was buried deeply in the heart of this Pharisee.... We have here another *marsh*; that is, a paradoxical saying, a veiled and pointed remark, often in the form of a riddle.... It must have sounded like a riddle to the ears of Nicodemus." [Hendriksen, *John*]

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, : "amen, amen": "The repetition of amen, or verily, verily, among the Jewish writers, was considered of equal import with the most solemn oath." [Clarke, *Commentary*] "The words by their emphasis generally presuppose some difficulty or misunderstanding to be overcome; and at the same time they mark the introduction of a new thought carrying the divine teaching farther forward." [Wescott, *John*]

Except a man be born again, : Possible meanings of the word *anōthen*, used 13 times in the NT:

- *from the first, from the beginning* : used in this sense in Lk 1:3 "of all things *from the very first*" and in Acts 26:5 "knew me *from the beginning*". This meaning however may be dismissed because it would not have a suitable meaning to the present context.
- *from above* (or, *from the top*) : everywhere else John uses the word it has this sense (He that cometh *from above*, 3:31; except it were given thee *from above*, 19:11; woven from the *top* throughout, 19:23) so it may be that John uses the word in the same sense in 3:3,7. The word also has this sense in Mt 27:51 "in twain from *the top* to the bottom"; Mk 15:38 "in twain from *the top* to the bottom"; James 1:17 "every perfect gift is *from above*"; James 3:15 "descendeth not *from above*"; and James 3:17 "the wisdom that is *from above*". The root part of the word is used 9 times in the NT (*anō*), 1x "to the brim", 5x "above", 2x "up", and 1x "high" (as in, the high calling of God). The meaning could be that ye must be born from above, i.e. from heaven.
- *anew, again* : used in this sense Gal 4:9 "ye desire *again* (literally, a second time *again*) to be in bondage?". "In favor of the rendering, *again*, it may be said: 1. that *from above* does not describe the *fact* but the *nature* of the new birth, which in the logical order would be stated after the fact, but which is *first* announced if we render *from above*. If we translate *anew* or *again*, the logical order is preserved, the *nature* of the birth being described in ver. 5. 2. That Nicodemus clearly understood the word as meaning *again*, since, in ver. 4, he translated it into a *second time*. 3. That it seems strange that Nicodemus should have been startled by the idea of a birth from heaven." [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Although the common translation is 'born', ... it might be noticed that the Greek verb is more naturally understood of the male parent than the female. It is the 'begotten' of old-fashioned speech. The point is that what Jesus says more naturally refers to the male parent than the female, and in this context refers to the action of God the Father. The way to the kingdom is not the way of human striving or of human excellence of any sort. We enter the kingdom because of what God does." [Morris, *John*]

he cannot see the kingdom of God. : The expression is equivalent to having everlasting life or being saved. "The kingdom of God is the realm in which His rule is recognized and obeyed and in which His grace prevails." [Hendriksen, *John*] There is nothing external preventing such looking but the problem is moral. "A new vision is required for the objects of a new world."

Many terms are used in scripture to describe what the Lord does for us in our salvation: redemption which emphasized a buying-back, justification which emphasizing a legal declaration of being without sin, imputation which emphasizes the righteousness of Christ as being applied to our account, and so on. But it should be here pointed out that none of these actually deal with our basic sinful nature. If this were not corrected, we may be redeemed, declared not guilty, bought with the blood of Christ and on our way to heaven, *and hating it!* Our very core nature despises holiness. To enter heaven in that state would be hell for us. But in the new birth (regeneration) the Lord makes our spirit alive together with Him, giving us a new nature. It is the new birth which makes us desire holiness and despise the weakness within. It is the new birth which puts a yearning in our hearts for the things of God. All other aspects of our salvation is external.

3:4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? : This does not necessarily imply Nicodemus was an old man, he was responding to Jesus as if what He had just said was absurd and takes an extreme case: could an old man be born all over again? Perhaps the response is one of offense. "It is possible that it was the form of expression that bothered Nicodemus. The words are not unlike those often used of a convert to the Jewish religion. When a Gentile decided to become an adherent of the Jewish way and was admitted by way of baptism and circumcision, it was often said that he was like 'a child newborn'. To use terminology that fitted the latest convert to Judaism would have seemed to Nicodemus the last thing that should have been said about such a distinguished person as he, a Pharisee and a member of the governing body, the Sanhedrin. J. Alexander Findlay says it was 'as though in modern times an Anglican dignitary or eminent Nonconformist divine were told to go and get converted in an evangelical mission hall!' It may be just what he needs, but he is unlikely to welcome the proposal. It may be this sort of thing that bothered Nicodemus." [Morris, *John*] The response could just as well been an honest inquiry, since Jesus sees this as a request for further explanation and continues to give it.

3:5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. : Various interpretations on "water and the Spirit":

- *water refers to baptism* in symbolic fashion only. “Being baptized with water is not sufficient. The *sign* is valuable, indeed.... But *the sign should be accompanied by the thing signified*: the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. It is the latter that is absolutely necessary if one is to be saved.” [Hendriksen, *John*] This is unlikely however because Nicodemus probably would not have immediately thought of John the Baptist when Jesus mentioned the water. Jesus is first and foremost talking to Nicodemus (and it is best to keep this in mind while we search for a proper interpretation), and why would Jesus introduce a confusing statement while trying to explain a confusing concept?
- *water refers to baptism* as being the means of salvation. “Christian baptism, the outward act of faith welcoming the promise of God, is incorporation into the Body of Christ, and so the birth of the Spirit is potentially united with the birth of water.” [Wescott, *John*] Other than already being unlikely for the reason given above, this would also conflict with other scriptures against “baptismal regeneration”, or that God gives the new birth at the moment we are baptized.
- *water refers to natural birth*. As children are enclosed in a sac of water, the reference is merely to our physical birth. I have problems with this interpretation since why is that necessary to be mentioned? “The only people who may be born again by the Spirit are people who have been born.” — sounds silly to me.
- *water refers to spiritual birth*. This may be foreign to our culture but quite acceptable to first century Jews: “Words referring to something wet were often used as euphemisms for the male semen: ‘water, dew, drop, rain’ and other words were all used in this way.... In the Greek text, ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’ go closely together in this passage (there is one ‘of’ that covers them both). Some have thought accordingly that the birth in question is one of water-and-Spirit, that is, a birth of ‘spiritual seed’; one must be born with the birth the Holy Spirit provides. It is a support to this view that a little later Jesus speaks of being born ‘of the Spirit’ (v8); and it is John’s habit to use expressions that differ from one another slightly but have essentially the same meaning.... Jesus would then be saying that the way into the kingdom is the way of divine action. We enter a completely new existence by virtue of what the Holy Spirit does in us.” [Morris, *John*]
- *water refers to the word of God*. In support of this are passages which describe the word of God as cleansing us: “now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you” (Jn 15:3), “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it: that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” (Eph 5:25,26), “of His own will begat us by the word of truth” (James 1:18) and “being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). That the word of God is used in regeneration is beyond doubt and is a potential explanation. The only thing I would like to suggest however is that we are thinking of the verse in light of NT passages which was not written when Jesus and Nicodemus talked. Would Nicodemus have thought of the Word of God when Jesus was talking to Him? The answer may be yes since the Word of God is critical in OT thinking as well as the NT.
- *water refers to symbolic cleansing*. “Some scholars place no stress on the connection with John the Baptist, but simply see ‘water’ as a natural symbol for being made clean. According to this view Jesus is saying that to enter the kingdom one must first be cleansed from one’s sins and then be given the positive endowment of the Holy Spirit of God, who enables people to live uprightly. There is a negative aspect to salvation (cleansing by water) and a positive aspect (the work of the Spirit).” [Morris, *John*] A possible parallel passage could be Titus 3:3-5 “we were [of the flesh] but He saved us by the washing [bath] of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.” If so, there may have been an OT passage which would have come to the mind of Nicodemus: Ez 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.” To Nicodemus then, the water would have (symbolically) cleansed from sin and the Spirit that which imparts life.

Of the opinions stated, I can take no firm stand although I could definitely say it does not refer to baptismal regeneration. It seems several of the Greek scholars I read believe the water and Spirit is combined in some fashion due to the grammar of the text, and I believe that to be true. It seems best to me to make the water refer to a symbolic washing of sorts, whether John’s baptism (doubtful) or the Word of God (again, doubtful) or connected in some manner with the Jewish washings. In trying to place myself in the context, I would imagine the correlation between these washings and its symbolism would be readily recognized by a teacher of the law. Nicodemus would have been well-versed in the Ezekiel passage, while perhaps not fully recognizing it’s import.

“Enter into. This more than *see* (ver. 3). It is to become partaker of; to go in and possess, as the Israelites did Canaan.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. : Perhaps making reference to the Jewish reliance on physical heritage (a teaching John the Baptist felt important as well), Jesus stresses that physical birth does not give one priority when it comes to salvation. It could be paraphrased: sinful human nature only produces sinful human nature (Job 14:4; Ps 51:5).

“That which is born. Strictly, *that which hath been born*, and consequently is now before us as born. The aorist tense (3, 4, 5, 7), marks the *fact* of birth; the perfect (as here), the *state* of that which has been born (see on 1 John 5:18, where both tenses occur); the neuter, *that which*, states the principle in the abstract. Compare ver. 8, where the statement is personal: *everyone* that is born. Compare 1 John 5:4, and 1 John 5:1,18.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. : This is new to Nicodemus. He is well-versed in the theology of

salvation by law-works, by the acts of men. Now he is being presented with the new idea that this salvation is a gift from God, and at least initially man is passive. "A person can do nothing about his own birth. And Jesus had said, 'Ye *must* be born anew.' Very often, in present-day preaching, this word *must* is misinterpreted. It should be clearly understood that, in harmony with the entire context, it does not refer to the realm of moral duty, but to that of the divine decree. When Jesus says, 'Ye *must* be born again,' He does not mean, 'By all means see to it that you are born again.' On the contrary, He means, 'Something has to happen to you: the Holy Spirit must plant in your hearts the life from above.' ... It is important to take note of the fact that Jesus mentions the necessity of regeneration before He speaks about faith. The work of God *within* the soul ever precedes the work of God in which the soul cooperates." [Hendriksen, *John*] This coincides with John's teaching in his epistle when he says "whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ *is born* of God," (1 Jn 5:1) in which the word is passive. The sense is that faith is the evidence of the new birth.

It's said George Whitefield used this text often in his preaching. When asked by one of his friends, "Why do you preach so often on the text, 'you must be born again'?" Whitefield replied, "Because you *must* be born again."

"Unto thee - ye must: note the change from the singular to the plural pronoun. In His address to Nicodemus (*thee*) the Lord had spoken also to those whom Nicodemus represented, and whom he had included when he said 'we know' (ver. 2). His error was the error of his class." [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. : Continuing on the sovereignty theme, Jesus illustrates this by the action of the wind. "Nobody on earth can direct the wind. It acts with complete independence. It cannot even be seen. That it must be there you know, for, in striking any object it makes a sound. Its source and its ultimate goal or destination no one knows.... The relation of the wind to your body resembles that of the Spirit to your soul. The wind does as it pleases. So does the Spirit. Its operation is sovereign, incomprehensible, and mysterious. What a lesson this was for a man who had been brought up in the belief that a person could and should *save himself* by perfect obedience to the law of Moses and to a host of man-made, thoroughly analyzable, human regulations." [Hendriksen, *John*]

Listeth is old English for *pleasure* or *willeth*. Wuest: "The wind blows where it desires to blow."

3:9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? : Nicodemus is struggling here with unlearning everything he has ever held dear. It is clear that with all of his Pharisaical training he still lacked the most elemental and fundamental spiritual truths. But to his credit (or better still, for the glory of the Lord!) it must be noticed that he had a heart which would listen, or Jesus would have never begun dealing with him in the manner in which He did.

3:10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? : Both master and Israel has the definite article ("thou art *the* teacher of *the* Israel"), making the sense to be something like "And *you*, that widely recognized and very prominent teacher of the highly favored people of Israel, do *you* actually mean to say that you are ignorant in these matters?"

3:11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. : Jesus' conversation now changes to a discourse, with Jesus speaking and Nicodemus listening. Nicodemus said "we know" (3:2), Jesus picks up on that and states what is about to be taught is something He knew without any doubt. Even stronger still, Jesus says "we testify" (corresponding to "we speak") of that which we have seen (corresponding to "we know"), repeating the sense of what He just said with much more force and more definite.

"We" probably is a reference to Jesus and John the Baptist rather than the prophets in general. Some believe this refers to Jesus and His disciples, but I tend to think He has been with them too short a time to consider them as part of a well-taught, knowledgeable group. Vincent takes the "we" to include all of those within His kingdom: "After the use of the singular number in vv. 3, 5, 7, 12, the plural here is noteworthy. It is not merely rhetorical - 'a plural of majesty' - but is explained by ver. 8, 'every one that is born of the Spirit.' The new birth imparts a new vision.... This *we* therefore includes, with Jesus, all who are truly born anew of the Spirit. Jesus meets the *we know* of Nicodemus (ver. 2), referring to the class to which he belonged, with another *we know*, referring to another class, of which He was the head and representative." [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? : The implication is that Jesus had been telling him earthly things, things which although heavenly in character and origin take place on earth; e.g. regeneration (the new birth). While these things were taught in the OT, they were rejected / overlooked / misunderstood by men such as Nicodemus. At best these doctrines were regarded as strange and not received. Jesus was saying, "if things which occur within man's experience is not received (i.e. the doctrine of the new birth, which although a mystery should at least be seen and recognized), then how could he possibly understand the grander themes of redemption (by God sending His Son to earth to redeem His people)? Those things were completely outside the range of man's experience and understanding (Isa 55:8,9 "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways ...").

3:13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. : Continuing, Jesus says to have such knowledge would have required first-hand information in the eternal throne-room of God when the decrees were made (if it is proper to use such terminology of the decrees). But no one has (nor could) gone up to heaven to check out these mysteries! "Was there actually no one present with the Father when the plan was made which centers in the decree to send the Son into the world in order to bear the curse and set man free? Yes, there was One, the One *who descended*

from heaven namely, the Son of Man.” [Hendriksen, *John*]

“Which is in heaven.- Lest a wrong meaning should be taken from the foregoing expression, and it should be imagined that, in order to manifest Himself upon earth He must necessarily leave heaven; our blessed Lord qualifies it by adding, the Son of Man Who is in heaven; pointing out, by this, the ubiquity or omnipresence of His nature: a character essentially belonging to God; for no being can possibly exist in more places than one at a time, but HE who fills the heavens and the earth.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

3:14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: : While the message Jesus was bringing was new, it was something revealed many times over in OT types and prophecies. Jesus uses one such illustration for the plan of redemption as found in the book of Numbers 21. Since Israel was in a state of rebellion again, the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, causing many to die. For redemption from the punishment, the Lord instructed Moses to make a serpent out of brass, place it upon a pole which was in the sight of all, and anyone who looked upon it would live (Num 21:8,9). Jesus used this to the eternal plan of redemption:

- in both cases death was the punishment for sin
- in both cases God provided the remedy through sovereign grace
- in both cases the remedy was something (or some One) to be lifted up in public view
- in both cases the remedy was applied by the look of faith

“Lifted up. The following are the uses of the word in the New Testament: The *exaltation of pride* (Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15; 14:11). The *raising of the humble* (Luke 1:52; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6). The *exaltation of Christ in glory* (Acts 2:33; 5:31). The *uplifting on the cross* (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34). The reference here is to the *crucifixion*, but beyond that, to the *glorification* of Christ. It is characteristic of John to blend the two ideas of Christ’s passion and glory (8:28; 12:32). Thus, when Judas went out to betray him, Jesus said, ‘Now is the Son of man glorified’ (13:31).” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. : Undoubtedly in the incident with Moses there were many who scoffed at such a plan of physical redemption and therefore physically died for their sins while salvation was full and free. The same is true with Jesus: the salvation of which He was explaining is not a universal redemption of every single person without exception. **The condition set forth was trust in the only redemption provided.** As long as one thought “the snake won’t bite me” (“I will be exempt from punishment”), or “I don’t need such a silly plan to cure my snake-bite, I’ll find my own medicine” (“I don’t need Christ, I can make it on my own merits”), or “Sure I was bitten but the bite doesn’t look bad, I’ll be alright” (“Oh I make mistakes, but I don’t think I’m that bad of a person to be consigned to hell”), and on and on, then there was death. **As long as one rejects one’s own spiritual condition as set forth in the scriptures, there is no hope of escape from eternal punishment.**

An interesting side parallel which is not directly connected with Jesus’ story: Israel took that brass snake and formed it into an object of idolatrous worship, one of which had to be destroyed years later (2 Kings 18:4). That which was a means of redemption originally became a stumbling-block to the Jews.

“In time the brazen serpent became an idol in the land

And they left the Living God to worship clay

When they forgot their suffering soon true faith had disappeared

And so some idolize a brazen cross today.”

[Michael Card, “Lift Up the Suffering Symbol”, from his CD “*The Beginning*”]

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. : The conjunction *for* establishes a causal relation between this and the preceding verse.

- **its character: so loved.** “The tense in the original (the aorist *āgapāsen*) shows that God’s love in action, reaching back to eternity and coming to fruition in Bethlehem and at Calvary, is viewed as *one* great central fact.” [Hendriksen, *John*]
- **its Author: God.** “God is ever full of life and full of love. Take all human virtues; then raise them to the *n*th degree, and realize that no matter how grand and glorious a total picture is formed in the mind, even that is a mere shadow of the love-life which exists eternally in the heart of Him whose very name is Love. And that love of God ever precedes our love (1 John 4:9,10,19; Rom 5:8-10), and makes the latter possible.” [Hendriksen, *John*]
- **its object: the world.** Since this is restricted to “whomsoever believes”, the ‘world’ here is obviously not animals and trees. The ‘world’ is lost mankind, exposed to judgement and in need of salvation. The term probably centered on the international aspect: men from every tribe and nation, not the Jews only but also the Gentiles. This message would have been important to the narrow Nicodemus who’s always seen the Lord through nationalistic eyes.
- **its Gift: His Son, the only-begotten.** “Literally the original reads, “that His Son, the only-begotten, He gave.” All the emphasis is on the astounding greatness of the gift.” [Hendriksen, *John*] “Gave. Rather than *sent*; emphasizing the idea of *sacrifice*.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

● **its purpose: that whoever believes should not perish but have everlasting life.** Perish is not the mere lost of physical existence nor annihilation. Perish is placed in opposition with everlasting life, and speaks of everlasting condemnation. Everlasting life: “It indicates a life that is different *in quality* from the life which characterizes the present age. However, the noun with its adjective as used here in 3:16 has also a quantitative connotation: it is actually *everlasting*, never-ending life.” [Hendriksen, *John*]

An important practical lesson is here presented: **love (the highest agapā love) is not confined and controlled by emotions but is rather above and often *in spite of* emotion. Agapā love is an act of the will, a decision. Agapā love may be defined as the desire for and delight in good for the object of its love.** God did not sit in heaven and look upon His fallen, corrupted, rebellious creation and “bubble over” with emotion! (If we were to deal strictly with emotions, the only “emotion” the Lord felt was anger and wrath.) Yet the Lord *by an act of His will chose* to love us, to act on our behalf and for our good. Being an act of the will, love can be *commanded* (God *commands* us to love one another as well as to love Him; you cannot command an emotion) and *to not love is an act of rebellion*. When we as believers look at another in our church or our families and the emotion we feel is hurt or disgust, that perhaps is something which cannot be prevented. *But it is rebellion when we respond accordingly and treat that person in such a manner.* God commands us to desire that person’s good and delight in that person’s good when it may come, in spite of how we *feel* about that person. Husbands / wives: do you love your spouse or has things dried up? Then, by an act of your will, treat your spouse as you would if the emotions were there! You may wake up one day to find the emotions present in an overwhelming manner. But whether you do or not, God *commands* us to love one another. Church member: is there another Christian that is a real problem to you? Again, by an act of your will, treat that Christian in the manner that you know you are suppose to, *in spite of how you may feel*. To not do so is disobedience, and it is not hypocritical just because you are doing one thing and you feel another. As has often been noted, when we respond by an act of our will and treat the person as the Lord would have us treat him, the emotions generally follow. *People who’s lives are led by their emotions are in constant turmoil.*

3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. : Again, directed to the Jewish mind set. The Jews expected the Messiah to come, set up the kingdom and condemn the heathen (Amos condemned this as well, Amos 5:18-20). That Jesus came not to condemn was the object of His *first* coming; His *second* coming is to be in judgement.

Condemn: primarily *to separate*; then *selecting one thing above another*, therefore *judging, deciding*. That the word also has the connotation of punitive judgement is obvious by *saved* being set in opposition with condemnation.

“*Sent* rather than *gave* (ver. 16) because the idea of sacrifice is here merged in that of authoritative commission.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:18 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. : God sees everyone in the world in one of two (and only two) states: those who are condemned (judged) and those who has been saved from that condemnation. Those who abides in Christ by faith is even now before God without the sentence of judgement against him. Those outside of Christ however is not awaiting the final verdict but stands under condemnation presently.

3:19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. : This is the condemnation, the judgement, the Divine decision or verdict. Paraphrased: “Now with respect to those who reject the only-begotten Son of God, this is the divine verdict, that the Christ who is Himself the Light — the very embodiment of the truth and love of God, yea, of all His attributes — He, by means of the word of prophecy and especially by means of His own incarnation, came into the realm of fallen mankind; but, though some accepted Him, by far the majority preferred the moral and spiritual darkness of sin (spiritual blindness, hatred of brethren, etc., see especially 1 Jn 2:11, but also 8:12; 12:35,46; and 1 Jn 2:8,9). In fact, they actually loved this darkness; and the reason was not that they were ignorant, having never heard the gospel, but rather this: their works were evil.” [Hendriksen, *John*]

Light = literally *the light*.

“Were. Habitually. The imperfect tense marking continuation.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, : As if not bad enough to love the darkness more than the light, like there were some acceptance to a degree of the light; rather there was a hatred for this light.

That doeth evil is written in a continued sense, “whoever is in the habit of practicing what is wrong”.

lest his deeds should be reproved. : the reason for this antagonism is given: because if he were to come to the light, his deeds would be made manifest for what they are. This points to that within man which rebels against correction, a refusal to admit sin. The comparison has been made of people like this resembling insects that hide themselves beneath logs and stones, always preferring the darkness, scurrying when exposed to light. Wuest: “for everyone who practices evil things hates the light, and does not come and face up to the light lest his works be effectually rebuked.” “In the New Testament it is found in the sense of *reprove* (Luke 3:19; 1 Timothy 5:20, etc.). *Convince* of crime or fault (1 Cor 14:24; James 2:9). *To bring to light or expose* by conviction (James 3:20; Eph 5:11, 13; Jn 8:46). So of the exposure of false teachers, and their refutation (Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15). *To test and expose with a view to correction*, and so, nearly equivalent to *chasten* (Heb 12:5). The different meanings unite in the word *convict*. Conviction is the result of *examination, testing, argument*. The test *exposes* and *demonstrates* the error, and *refutes* it,

thus *convincing, convicting, and rebuking* the subject of it. This conviction issues in *chastening*, by which the error is corrected and the erring one purified. If the conviction is rejected, it carries with it condemnation and punishment. The man is thus convicted of *sin, of right, and of judgment* (Jn 16:8). In this passage the evil-doer is represented as avoiding the light which tests, that light which is the offspring of love (Rev 3:19) and the consequent exposure of his error. Compare Ephesians 5:13; John 1:9-11. This idea of loving darkness rather than light is graphically treated in Job 24 and runs through vv. 13-17." [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

3:21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, : while unbeliever resembles insects hiding, believers are as house plants in a window who turn their leaves to the light of the sun. "He that doeth truth" is in the continued sense as in the previous verse: "he who is in the habit of doing what is true."

that they are wrought in God. : while far from perfect, the deeds of believers have their source in God and is done with God's approval. "In His presence, and through His assistance."

Here Jesus ends His discourse: finishing with what we could compare to an invitation: "Nicodemus, you too should leave the realm of darkness and come to the light." While not forced the choice is presented and left with him. It appears to be most commentators opinion that Nicodemus does not here come to the light but eventually does. "This is the end of our Lord's discourse to Nicodemus; and though we are not informed here of any good effects produced by it, yet we learn from other scriptures that it had produced the most blessed effects in his mind, and that from this time he became a disciple of Christ. He publicly defended our Lord in the Sanhedrin, of which he was probably a member, John 7:50, and, with Joseph of Arimathea, gave Him an honorable funeral, John 19:39, when all His bosom friends had deserted Him." [Clarke, *Commentary*]