

# You Must Be Born From Above

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus [John 3:1-12] is the climax of a rejection that was mentioned by John as early as the first chapter.

**John 1:11** [NIV] *“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”*

Luke adds that Jesus’ contemporaries hated him. [Luke 19:14]

But as representatives of the realm of darkness, the Jews were **not** able to quench the light. [John 1:5]

Even though John the Baptist witnessed that Jesus was the Son of God [John 1:15-34], Jesus’ identity was evident in His miracles [as turning the water to wine – John 2:1-11].

Some Jewish rulers and teachers [John 3:10] knew that He had divine powers, but they rejected His message.

Samaritans, ironically, believed Him and accepted His teaching. [John 4:39-42]

The apostle John’s intention in **chapter 3** was to highlight the Jewish rejection in terms of a national confrontation between two representative individuals [Jesus and Nicodemus].

**That Nicodemus represented Judaism in this account is evident from John’s description of him as a Pharisee, a teacher, and a ruler of the Jews. [John 3:1, 10]**

A clearer indication that this was a national confrontation is afforded by the plural personal pronouns used by Nicodemus and by Jesus in the claim *“we know”* [John 3:2] in which Nicodemus refers to Judaism, and in Jesus’ response *“I told you [plural] but you...”* [John 3:12]

**These pronouns present Nicodemus as the embodiment of Judaism, speaking on its behalf and receiving replies for the whole nation.**

In addition to the hints mentioned above, John has included a reference to the blindness of the Jews, in veiled connection with night. [John 3:2]

Nicodemus’ preference for the night echoes the thought that the Jews loved darkness because their deeds were evil. [John 3:19-21]

Jesus could have praised Nicodemus for coming to Him, but the issue in this account is Judaism, **not** Nicodemus’ personal attitude towards the truth.

Nicodemus approached Jesus with a comment that is often misread.

He began with an acknowledgement that Jesus was a man *“come from God,”* for no man can do these miracles that you do except God is with him. [John 3:2]

**This admission did not grant that Jesus was the Son of God, but only that He had been commissioned by God.**

**For that matter, so were the prophets of the Old Testament and John the Baptist.**

**At the very best, the Jews, represented by Nicodemus, were prepared to allow no more than a divine mission for Jesus.**

In the apostle John's terms, however, the status of a divinely-commissioned teacher does **not** capture the truth governing Jesus.

Nicodemus indeed could see the miracles were being performed, but was **not** able to perceive their full import or purpose.

For this reason, Christ pointed out to Nicodemus that these were only signs, a visible manifestation of a higher power, and could **not** be experienced through the physical senses.

Sense experience is what John meant by "see" [John 3:3], as can be surmised from expressions like "see life" [John 3:36] and "taste death" [Mark 9:1].

The Kingdom of God would be viewed **only** if the missing condition were present, namely an internal change that would bring about an entirely new outlook. [Romans 12:2]

The person who undergoes this internal change is so drastically changed that they could be described as a new being.

Since the new being would see things from a higher perspective, God's perspective, they are described as "born from above."

### **Meaning of words used in Greek that pertain to birth.**

"Gennaō" – derives its meaning from the root word "genna" [birth]. It literally means "to produce through birth."

**Whether the agent is male or female, the meaning of the verb is the same "to bring a child into the world."**

Some clear scriptures that illustrate the meaning of this verb are –

**Matthew 2:1** [NIV] "Born" – "gennaō"

**Matthew 19:12** [NIV] "Born" – "gennaō"

**Luke 1:13** [NIV] "Bear" – "gennaō"

The Greek language has other verbs for describing birth specifically as an act of a woman. One of these verbs is "tikō".

This verb **cannot** be applied literally to a father because he is **not** bodily equipped for this function, but a figurative application of the verb to a man is in order.

In this sense, Onesimus became Paul's son. [Philemon 10]

Some clear scriptures where "tikō" is used literally to describe parturition are –

**Matthew 1:21** [NIV] "Birth" – "tikō"

**Luke 1:57** [NIV] "Birth" – "tikō"

**Hebrews 11:11** [King James] "Delivered" – "tikō"

**John 3:3** [NIV] "In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

The verb translated "born" is "gennaō" which describes coming into the world, in this case coming into the Kingdom of God, **not** a birth in the sense of parturition.

In **John 3:3** the verb “*gennaō*” is accompanied by the adverb “*anōthen*.”

**Depending on the context, this verb can mean “again” or “from above.”**

The nearest expression in English is “*from the top*.”

John uses the expression **only** “*from above*” [see **John 3:31; John 19:11**]

When John wants to say “*again*” he uses other terms.

One such term is “*palin*” [**John 1:35; John 4:3, 13, 46, 54, etc.**]

**John 3:3 – therefore should be rendered “born from above” not “born again.”**

Of course, if someone is born from above when they are old, they are born a second time.

John’s meaning is a birth from God, **not** merely a second birth.

**Only a birth from God’s Holy Spirit would enable Nicodemus to perceive that the Kingdom of God was at work in the miracles that the Jews had witnessed.**

**John 1:12-13** [NIV] “*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*”

In fact, John states clearly that those who accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour are “*born*” Greek “*gennaō*” of God who is above.

**Born or begotten? –**

Some translators render “*gennaō*” in John 3:3 as “*born*”, others as “*begotten*.”

The word “*begotten*” is obsolete in modern English, except in rhetorical expressions, such as “*hatred begets murder*.”

The King James translation says that Abraham “*begat*” Isaac.

In King James English “*bear*” and “*beget*” have different meanings.

“*Bear*” applies only to parturition while “*beget*” can refer to the father’s bringing a child into the world [obviously through his wife’s parturition].

A mistake has been made with respect to the two verbs, by associating “*beget*” with act of conception, but from the standpoint of a father.

The verb “*beget*” does **not** have such a meaning, and the wide acceptance of the wrong meaning is due to the fact that “*beget*” is an obsolete verb, thus lending itself more easily to misuse.

Compound verbs beginning with “*be*” describe personal involvement in the action indicated.

For example, *beget*, *beseech*, *beguile*, *behave*, *betray*, etc. express personal involvement.

It is for this reason that the King James translators chose to say that Abraham *begat* Isaac.

With reference to **John 3**, Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus that the Jews experience physical matters [including the visible miracles He had performed] only because they were equipped by their physical birth for that task.

**Spiritual matters can be experienced only by those who are equipped by a spiritual birth.**

**1 Corinthians 2:9-14** [NIV] *“However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,” but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

The Holy Spirit joined with our human spirit [**Job 32:8**] opens up our minds to spiritual thoughts of our Creator God who lives in the spirit realm, [**Proverbs 20:27**].

Humans then need two births, otherwise we are hampered by our limitations and cannot know that it is God, in this case, who is working miracles.

**2 Corinthians 5:17** [NIV] *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”*

**The second birth makes believers into new beings.**

In this sense Nicodemus was an old man in both senses of the word, physically and spiritually.

**Born of water and spirit –**

What **John 3:5** is telling us is that the repentance and regeneration that came about through the acceptance of John the Baptist’s baptism was **not** enough for the understanding of spiritual things.

Humans must be born of the spirit also, because it is the Holy Spirit working in us that affects the dramatic change that is needed.

**1 Corinthians 6:9-11** [NIV] *“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*

Before baptism, by total immersion, depicting our death [**Romans 6:3-4, 6-7, 11**] and resurrection to a new life.

A new life freed from the penalty of death by accepting the sacrifice of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

By faith in Jesus Christ His righteousness is credited to us making us acceptable to God who then blesses us with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. [**Romans 4:13, 20-25**]

**John 16:13** [NIV] *“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”*

**The Holy Spirit then opens up our mind and human spirit to spiritual truths.**

**It is on this higher level that God’s Kingdom functions.**

**John 3:6** [NIV] *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”*

**Whatever is born of the flesh through a human birth, cannot transcend human fleshly limitations.**

**On the other hand those who are born of the Holy Spirit are able to reach areas that lie beyond the physical realm.**

**John 3:8** [NIV] *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*

In this verse Jesus uses the analogy of the wind to take thought on this subject one step further since the Holy Spirit is so important, because He functions beyond physical human grasp.

We humanly know the results of the activity of the wind, leaves blown about, trees bending, etc., but the origin, the cause, the “*where from*” and the “*where to*” of the wind, are **not** disclosed in the physical results.

Lives are changed and miracles are taking place, but the source and destination of what is evidenced are **not** understood.

**John 3:9-21** [NIV] *“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”*

**In the context of this lack of understanding, the Jews of Christ’s day were rejecting the Kingdom of God, and John constructs the account in a way that incorporates the truths that the Jews had rejected.**

**Jews rejected Jesus the Son of Man, coming from heaven. [v13]**

**Rejected Jesus as the Son of God. [v17-18]**

**Rejected Jesus as the light of the world. [v19]**

**This same rejection is seen in the vast majority of human beings in every generation since.**

**Misuse of Christ’s words in John 3 –**

The conversation in **John 3** was initiated by Nicodemus.

**We have no record or reason to believe that Jesus ever went to anyone to ask if that person had been born again, as we find today.**

This account given by John is often treated as a passport for confronting unbelievers to ask if they have been born again, or to encourage them to do so by accepting Jesus Christ.

**The purpose of this passage of scripture is to register first, a serious lack in Judaism, in which the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit was **not** and is **not** understood and the work of God’s Kingdom was **not** perceived.**

**For those outside of Judaism it is the lack of understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing us to the point of repentance by convicting us of sin, showing us where true righteousness is to be found and confronting us with the realisation of a time of judgement. [John 16:5-16]**