

An In-Depth Study Of John 3:1-12

[Part 1]

How many times have we heard that, if we wish to understand a difficult passage in the Christian Bible, we must know its context and historical background?

Context and historical background gives a passage the setting from which its meaning can naturally emerge.

For **John 3:1-12** to be understood we need to understand the context of the entire book of John, and also some of the traditional thoughts of Judaism.

What was John's purpose in writing the record of the life and teaching of our Saviour Jesus Christ?

John 20:30-31 [NIV] *“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*

John wishes to show three things in this account.

- a) Show that Jesus is the looked for Messiah.
- b) Show that Jesus is the Son of God.
- c) Show that Jesus gives eternal life to believers. [also read **John 11:25-27**]

John essentially accomplishes his three-part purpose by demonstrating that Jesus Christ's works and even His words are of divine origin.

There are also secondary themes and tensions that John used to accomplish his purpose.

For example, John contrasts light with darkness, [download our article *'Let There Be Light'* listed under *'Bible Study'*] eternal life with temporal life, heavenly things with earthly things, flesh with spirit, truth with falsehood, belief with unbelief, John the Baptist with Christ, and Judaism with Christianity.

These themes shed light on the words of Jesus that John was inspired to select for the purposes of his account.

Regarding Jesus' origins, John opens his account with a stunning prologue, which reveals Christ's pre-existence as the divine Word and that the Word became flesh and lived for a while among humans.

The first point that John makes is that Jesus was more than a great rabbi or teacher, **Jesus was God in human form.**

This then is woven throughout his gospel account. [see **John 1:1; John 5:23; John 9:35-38; John 10:30-36; John 14:9; John 20:28**]

Jesus' divine origin gives Him the authority to grant eternal life to His followers. [**John 8:12; John 17:2**]

Of Jesus' miraculous works John states –

John 21:25 [NIV] *“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”*

This may **not** be an overstatement. Thousands of books have been written about Jesus Christ and His teaching, and many thousand more could be written, and still **not** exhaust the complexities of the Son of God!

Even so, Jesus’ miraculous works, as recorded in the Christian Bible, are sufficient to show that He is able to grant eternal life. [**John 3:14-15; John 11:23-27; John 11:43-44**]

Even the words that Jesus Christ spoke were extraordinary.

John 6:63 [NIV] *“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”*

When Jesus asked the twelve disciples if they would leave Him as the other disciples had, what was Peter’ inspired response?

John 6:66-68 [NIV] *“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? **You have the words of eternal life.**”*

Jesus Christ’s words show us how we receive the gift of eternal life.

Many commentators of the Christian Bible have noted that the apostle John records an unusual number of misunderstandings between Jesus and His listeners.

The probable reason for John selecting so many of these occasions, was to illustrate the superiority of Jesus Christ over other people.

These misunderstandings are almost all centred around people taking Christ’s words on some physical plane, when He intended them to be understood spiritually.

Below is a list of misunderstandings for your reference and future study.

John 2:19-21; John 3:4, 9; John 4:10-11; John 6:52; John 7:33-36; John 7:41-49; John 8:21-22; John 8:56-59; John 11:11-16; John 13:33-38; John 14:4-11; John 16:17-18; John 21:22-23.

The context of John 3 –

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus was representative of the Christian Church, Jesus Christ as its head [**Colossians 1:18**] and the Jewish religion with the high priest as its head.

The name Nicodemus appears often in rabbinic literature, Jesus calls this Nicodemus *“Israel’s teacher,”* or literally *“the teacher of Israel”* [**John 3:10**]. **Nicodemus must have been highly respected and an able representative of the Pharisees, and Judaism.**

At the time of John’s writing this message [mid 90s AD] the clash between the Christian Church and the synagogue was particularly intense.

John’s readers would have been very interested in knowing more about the work of Jesus Christ and His disciples and the Jewish response to them. [see **John 3:10-11; John 7:11-13; John 7:45-49; John 9:20-23; John 9:29-34; John 12:37, 42-43; John 18:19; John 19:38-39; John 20:19**]

The way John tells the story, Nicodemus approaches Jesus without stating his purpose for coming.

The sense one might get is that John’s purposes are more important than Nicodemus’.

As the conversation unfolds, Nicodemus is quickly forgotten.

Jesus moves the conversation from singular to plural pronouns, “*we speak*” and “*you*” [plural in the Greek], etc.

The fact that although the conversation ends in **verse 21**, no reference is made to Nicodemus **after v11**, confirms that after the initial incident, the conversation is between the Christian Church and synagogue or Christianity and Judaism.

Nicodemus came by night to visit Jesus, this may have been for reasons of security. [John 19:38-39]

But as the main theme of this conversation is on the spiritual level, it is more probable that John intended to indicate the darkness out of which Nicodemus came was that of spiritual blindness into the presence of the spiritual light of truth, Jesus Christ.

Why is all of this background important?

Because the awareness of the context and background helps us to understand the real meaning of the text and the impact it should have on our life.

Our task is **not** to arrive at a meaning that suits our belief and purpose, but to learn what the apostle John meant by the words and events he recorded, under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. [2 Timothy 3:16-17].

We cannot know what Jesus meant by the words that John records unless we know His purpose and the context of John’s writing.

When Nicodemus said, “*we know*” [v2] it shows that Nicodemus brought with him views of others.

The Pharisees were willing to acknowledge Jesus to a certain point and grant Him some recognition.

Nicodemus called Jesus “*rabbi*” meaning “*my teacher*”.

But the apostle John makes it very plain in his opening statement that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah that all the people, including the Pharisees, were awaiting. [John 1:1-5, 14].

Also that all humans must believe in Jesus Christ and His message if they want to receive the gift of eternal life. [John 11:25-27; John 20:30-31; 1 John 4:13-15]

Nicodemus’ opening statement indicates that he was not prepared to hear the words of Jesus Christ by not accepting Him to be what He had said, the very Son of God, but a messenger from God, reducing Jesus Christ to the level of a created angel.

Nicodemus was possibly considering some kind of compromise, merger or peaceful co-existence with Jesus and His disciples.

Jesus was about to tell Nicodemus that his whole religion was ineffectual for entry into the Kingdom of God and was about to be superseded by Christianity, a new covenant between the Creator God and all humanity, **not** being limited to Israel.

Unless you are born again –

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 words of Jesus Christ were clearly not understood by Nicodemus as shown in his response [v4].

But in what way did Nicodemus misunderstand?

He surely could **not** have taken Jesus Christ's words literally.

Nicodemus was **not** a simpleton.

As a highly respected teacher in Israel, he would have been well acquainted with the use of analogy in teaching and illustrating.

Parables, for example, are lessons set in analogies.

It is well documented that the Pharisees used parables, analogies and allegories extensively.

It is also well documented that Pharisees were acquainted with the idea of rebirth.

There are several allusions to rebirth and being a child of God in the apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books, written in the inter-testamental period.

Concepts of new birth and new life are **not** original in or unique to early Christianity.

Jewish writers 587-538BC referred to being or becoming God's children. [**Wisdom of Solomon 2:13, 16, 18; Ecclesiasticus 4:10-11; Ecclesiasticus 23:1, 4**]

Images of new birth also appear outside of Judaism.

Jesus had said of the Pharisees that they searched the land and sea to make a proselyte to Judaism, and instead of making them a child of Abraham [Jewish], they made a child of hell. [**Matthew 23:15**]

The rabbis even debated whether a newly converted Gentile might be permitted to marry a close relative, such as a sister or mother, because he was now a completely new man and all previous connections were broken.

No such ruling was made, but the fact that they were engaged in such a discussion, if only on a theoretical basis, underscores their familiarity with the idea.

Some commentators have suggested the incestuous man as mentioned in **1 Corinthians 5:1** may have been practising what the rabbis only discussed in theory, interesting but such an idea is only in itself a theory!

Clearly, the Pharisees were acquainted with the idea of rebirth, but they had some mistaken notions about it; namely, they believed it was the Gentiles who needed it, not they.

John 3:4 [NIV] *"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"*

Why did Nicodemus say this?

Part of the answer lies in Nicodemus' Pharisaic view of rebirth and part of the answer lies in understanding the original Greek word translated "*again*."

First, let's take a closer look at Nicodemus' concept of rebirth.

In first-century Judaism, being a natural-born Israelite was thought to be almost a guarantee of salvation. [Matthew 3:9; John 8:33-34]

An Israelite didn't need to be converted as a proselyte was to the nation of Israel. He was already born that way and would have been circumcised the eighth day.

To the Pharisees, the nation of Israel was the Kingdom of God, and the Messiah was to come and establish Israel's dominance over the Gentile nations.

Nicodemus was already a natural-born Israelite and in his eyes a "good" one.

Why should he have to be converted [born again] like a proselyte, into the nation of Israel?

To the best of his knowledge, which must have been extensive as a Pharisee, he had done everything right according to his religion.

And that was the problem, his religion.

For Jesus meant what the apostle Paul was inspired to say –

Romans 2:28-29 [NIV] *"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."*

Had Jesus said "Gentiles must be born again," Nicodemus would have understood Him.

But when Jesus said that even a devout Jew needed a rebirth, Nicodemus was understandably troubled because it amounted to telling him, in his old age, that the religion he had been practicing all his life was ineffectual for eternal life in the Kingdom of God. [John 5:39-40]

In Nicodemus' mind, the Pharisees were the best of God's children.

But Jesus was telling Nicodemus that **not** even the Pharisees were God's children in the way they needed to be in order to receive eternal life.

This went against everything Nicodemus knew and taught.

An old and highly respected rabbi would find this very hard to believe.

It meant that Nicodemus had been wrong and he would have to start his religious or spiritual life all over again.

Nicodemus' questions show that he understood rebirth to be something he could experience in this life.

Nicodemus did not say "*born after he is dead*" but "*when he is old.*"

Since Jesus was using symbolic language to convey His teaching, Nicodemus obliged Him and used symbolic language right back.

Although Nicodemus' questions could be interpreted literally, he meant them symbolically.

To put it another way, Jesus' words must have made as much sense to Nicodemus as if Jesus had said "*you must re-enter your mother's womb.*"

So Nicodemus illustrated, with his questions, that he thought Jesus was applying spiritual rebirth to the wrong person.

It was the universal way that Jesus applied what He said that caused Nicodemus to react the way that he did.