

REFLECTION GUIDE

JOHN 3:1-15 | BORN FROM ABOVE

KEY TERMS

Kingdom of God - The *kingdom of God* refers to “reign” or “rule” or God not to a physical “realm” of God. The synoptic gospels use the term often, but this is the only occurrence in John’s gospel. John more frequently speaks of *eternal life*, which is used similarly to the phrase *kingdom of God*.

Born again - The word translated *again* (“another” in Greek) carries a dual meaning of “from above” and “again.” Jesus uses this phrase not to speak of a second physical birth, but a spiritual transformation that comes from God, reshaping a person’s life upon believing in Jesus as Lord.

Spirit/wind - The Greek word “pneuma” can mean both “wind” and “spirit.” Jesus uses it to refer to both in this passage, first saying that being *born again* by the Holy Spirit is necessary to enter the kingdom of God, and second to say that the Spirit is like the wind—invisible, but with undeniable effect.

SYNOPSIS

In chapter three, a leading Pharisee named Nicodemus, who has seen or heard about Jesus’ *signs*, comes to Jesus at night (v. 1-2). After Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus must be sent from God. Jesus responds and says, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God* (v. 3). Nicodemus, however, misunderstands and takes Jesus’ words literally, asking how someone can be physically born again (v. 4). Jesus goes on to explain that he’s talking about spiritual rebirth that happens by the Holy Spirit (vv. 5-8). The Old Testament looked forward to a day when God’s kingdom would come in fullness (see Is 9:1-7 & Zech 9:9-10), and it would have been expected that a religious leader like Nicodemus would be looking for that day to come. However, this day was typically seen as apocalyptic (or *end of the age*). So it would have been natural for Nicodemus to be confused about how it might be possible that he could *enter* or see the kingdom. Jesus, though, makes it clear that this is a misunderstanding and that Israel’s leaders should have known better based on the OT Scriptures (vv. 9-12). Jesus then grounds his authority for his knowledge about these things in the fact that he is the divine Son of Man, who has come from heaven and will return to heaven (v. 13). Moreover, Jesus says that he—the Son of Man—will be *lifted up*, just as Moses *lifted up* the serpent in the wilderness, *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*. (v. 14-15). Jesus is referencing a story from Numbers where the Israelites were bitten by serpents and God heals them when they look at a bronze serpent Moses holds up before them. Jesus is foreshadowing his death and says that as the Israelites were healed by belief in God’s power, so people come to eternal life through belief in him.

GOING DEEPER

Read Ezekiel 36:22-27. How is Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus about being *born again* a fulfillment of God’s promise to give his people a new heart and spirit? What similarities do you see between the two passages? If you are a follower of Jesus, how have you seen evidence of the Spirit in your life?

DID YOU KNOW?

Nicodemus shows up later in John’s Gospel to defend Jesus before the Sanhedrin (7:50) and to help Joseph of Arimathea (who gave his burial tomb for Jesus’ use) bury Jesus according to Jewish custom. His timidity at first grew to bold, honest faith in Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read John 3:1-15. What is the setting, time, and purpose of this conversation?
2. Put yourself in Nicodemus' shoes and consider the conversation from his perspective. In what ways can you relate to him and/or empathize with his bewilderment at Jesus' teaching?
3. In verses 3-7, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again (or born from above!). Compare and contrast verse 3 and verse 5 to see what is the same and what is different. What spiritual reality is Jesus describing in verses 3-7?
4. Read Numbers 21:4-9, which provides the background for what Jesus says in verses 14-15. What surprises you most about the actions of the Lord in this passage? Do you find it both troubling and comforting? Why or why not?
5. In verses 14-15, Jesus says that the Son of Man "must be lifted up" like the serpent in the time of Moses. To what future event is Jesus referring with this statement? What is the result of looking with faith at Jesus Christ "lifted up" for us (verse 15)?

LIVING THE WORD

6. Jesus' teaching in these verses challenges us to acknowledge our total dependence upon God and total inability to save ourselves. How does this give us a bigger view of God's grace?
7. If you were talking to a college-aged friend who didn't go to church, how would you explain what it means to be "born from above" (or born again) as Jesus teaches in these verses? Explain how this is good news for your friend.
8. Jesus' teaching about the new birth means that our salvation must be more than emotional experience, intellectual assent, moral improvement, or cultural adaptation. How does Jesus' teaching in these verses challenge us to fully appreciate the total transformation God brings to our lives in our new birth?

Practice to consider: As you begin each day this week, ask the Lord to help you to appreciate the new life he's given to you in Jesus. Seek to walk each day with gratitude for his gift.