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# The Ministry of Christ in Judea

## Jesus and Nicodemus: The Encounter

John 3:1–15

### Introduction

This lesson has two parts. The first covers the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus (vv. 1–15). The second considers what Jesus meant by being lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent (vs. 14). Often, when people read through the Bible, statements like this are all but overlooked. This is very unfortunate because John presents this statement by Jesus—and then develops it—as a part of the testimony which proves that Jesus is the Son of God (20:30–31). Almost everyone knows the so-called “Golden Text” of the Bible (John 3:16), but how many are familiar with the preceding statement by Jesus which leads to this conclusion? A true seeker should never neglect verses like this.

### Questions

1. *Who was Nicodemus? What kind of a man was he? (cf. 7:50–2, 19:38–39. At each mention, notice the references back to this event)*
2. *Who are “we” in vs. 2? What does this verse teach us concerning the purpose of miracles?*
3. *From what we know of the reaction of these leaders to the teachings of Jesus, what else does vs. 2 indicate concerning their attitude? (Hint: see also Acts 4:13–22)*
4. *Why does Jesus answer a question which Nicodemus did not ask (vs. 3)? (Hint # 1: The “Nathanael event” of John 1:48; hint #2: Don’t let chapter divisions throw you off track.)*

5. *How do you think Nicodemus reacted to this? What was his attitude when he questioned Jesus' remarks? (That is, did he react like a Pharisee, or more like Nathanael? The way you view this could have a bearing on your answers to some of the other questions)*

### **Born again**

The Greek word for “again” is *anōthen* <509>, variously translated: *again, all over, beginning, from above, top*. This is not the same word commonly used to mean “again,” as for example in, “It happened again a second time.” This particular word can be understood in more than one way. Here are some examples of how *anōthen* is used elsewhere. How are these examples translated in your Bible?

Matt. 27:51, Mk. 15:38

Lk 1:3

John 3:31

John 19:11

Gal. 4:9 (end of verse)

James 1:17, 3:15, 17

6. *What did Jesus mean by “born again?” How did Nicodemus interpret this?*
7. *How does this relate to the previous story? (John 2:13–22)*
8. *Why did Jesus rebuke Nicodemus for not understanding His language?*

9. *As part of the admonition to Nicodemus, in vv. 11–14, how might Jesus have been preparing Nicodemus for the conflict which he was likely to face if he decided to be one of His followers? (It will be helpful for you to know that the pronouns in these verses are plural: “If I told y’all (or, “you guys”) earthly things, and y’all didn’t believe...” etc.)*

### **Water and the Spirit**

Two primary arguments are used by some in order to avoid the conclusion that baptism is in any way what Jesus meant by “water.” The first argument is that water refers to the natural, physical birth (the water of birth). In the second argument, the Greek word for “and” (*kai*) is given the meaning, *even* or *that is*: “One must be born of water, that is, the Spirit.”

10. *With what term does John himself describe the physical birth in chapter 1? What awkward redundancy does the first argument have?*
11. *What awkward redundancy does the second argument have?*

## **Under the Iceberg: The Serpent in the Wilderness**

**(John 3:14–15)**

Though nearly everyone knows what John 3:16 *says*, in this part of the lesson, we will seek a deeper understanding of its meaning. Crucial to this understanding is the connection Jesus makes between Himself and what is recorded in Numbers 21:4–9. It is a bazaar event; an event which no one, making up the story of Israel in the wilderness, could possibly conceive, much less record. There seems to be little reason or purpose in it—almost a passing fantasy. Yet Jesus attaches the significance of His sacrifice and the salvation of the world to it. Therefore, without an understanding of this connection, one simply can not fully appreciate what is said in John 3:16.

**Numbers 21:4-9**

The Hebrew root word for the pole (or standard) that Moses lifted up is *nes* <05251>. It is translated *pole, standard, ensign, banner, etc.* but it always has a more important meaning than just a pole. Here are some passages where this word appears (notice the way they are translated in your version): Ex. 17:15 (Jehovah-nissi, the LORD is my banner); Num. 26:10 (a warning or sign); and in the prophets, banner, signal, ensign or sign (Is. 5:26, 11:10, 12, Jer. 4:6, 21,, 51:12, 27, etc.). This will be important for you to know when we consider some of the prophets.

12. *Describe what happened to Israel during this part of their journey?*

13. *What was God's response to Moses' intercession?*

14. *What did a person have to do in order to be cured of their serpent bites?*

**John 8:26-28, 12:32-33**

15. *What did Jesus mean, by "lifted up?"*

16. *What would (some) people understand once He was lifted up?*

17. *What did Jesus say would happen when He was lifted up?*

18. *In the context of 12:20–33, the things Jesus said form a response to what event? (12:20–26).*
19. *How does all this connect to what Jesus told Nicodemus, and also with John 3:16?*
20. *What prophecy was fulfilled in John 19:37?*
21. *Can you see from Zechariah’s prophecy something that might lead to salvation? (Hint: it has to do with some people’s response to Jesus’ death.)*
22. *Because Jesus connected Himself with the “serpent event” of Numbers 21:4–9 this is a type/anti-type story.*
- a. *What did the serpent(s) represent?*
  - b. *What did the standard represent?*

### **Some other interesting details**

The Law of Moses has several stories and laws that, on the surface, may appear to have no rationality behind them; but, when seen from their New Testament connections, they give testimony to the profound wisdom and planning of God. As previously noted, one of those stories is the Serpent in the Wilderness. Yet that story itself leads to even more “obscurely profound” things.

According to 2 Cor. 5:21, while nailed to the cross Christ became *sin* on our behalf. Gal. 3:13 tells us how this happened, by reference to Deut. 21:22–23. This Law says that if someone is executed by hanging, his body must not be allowed to remain overnight, but must be buried the same day because, “...He who is hanged (on a tree) is accursed of God” and if the body were to be left hanging, the land would be polluted because of that curse! Though innocent of any wrong-doing, Christ nevertheless came under this curse when they “lifted Him up” on the cross.

Some think this may help explain Christ's words, "My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?" That is, Jesus felt the presence of the Father withdraw from Him because He came under that curse. When Christ died, the Law, with all its curses, died with Him.

## Follow the threads

Isaiah 11 speaks of the Messiah; the first 5 verses make that clear. In those opening verses, the Seed (the Christ) is referred to as a shoot and a branch; a "root of Jesse," the father of David. (The father has more honor than the son, so it is probable that the use of David's father as the one from whom the Seed would come amplifies the honor of the Seed). In prophecy, the Messiah is often referred to as the Branch (cf. Is. 4:2; Jer. 23:5, 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12). In the Messiah's kingdom peace will reign (vv. 6–9). The reason for this peace is given in vs. 5: "All the earth (or land) will be full of the knowledge of Jehovah as the waters cover the sea." This verse, then, defines the limits of God's kingdom: it covers the whole earth, but only those who accept His word will be part of it. It is among *these* citizens, not the citizens of the world, that peace will reign.

### "In that day" (vv. 10–12):

Verse 10 continues the time-frame under consideration. The things predicted in the ensuing verses will take place during the days of the Messiah's reign.

1. The nations (=Gentiles) will resort to the Messiah (as their hope).
2. The Messiah will stand as a "signal" (or banner) for the peoples. The word for *signal* is the same word, *nes*, used for the kind of standard that Moses lifted up. When you see the words "nations" and "peoples" connected together in Messianic prophecy, it often refers to Gentiles and Jews. For example, compare Ps. 2:1–3 with the corresponding commentary in Acts 4:25–28:

#### Psalm 2:1-12

- 1 Why are the **nations** in an uproar, And the **peoples** devising a vain thing?
- 2 The **kings of the earth** take their stand, And the **rulers** take counsel together Against the LORD and against His Anointed:

#### Acts 4:27-8

"... there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus... both **Herod** and **Pontius Pilate**, along with the **Gentiles** and the **peoples of Israel**..."

Nations.....Gentiles  
 Peoples ..... Peoples of Israel  
 Kings of the earth ..... Pontius Pilate (Ruler Romans)  
 Rulers ..... Herod (Ruler of Jews)

3. Vs. 11: "...on that day..." the remnant of God's people will be gathered (into His kingdom) from all parts of the world. See also Is. 41:1 and 42:4.
4. In vs. 12 the structural order of the events in vs. 10 is reversed. Also, the insertion in vs. 12 of "Israel and Judah" in place of "peoples" in vs. 10, gives solid basis for interpreting this as Jews and Gentiles.

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Vs. 10: The Gentiles resort to Messiah—the standard (*nes*) is for the Jews.

Vs. 12: The standard is for the Gentiles—Israel (*resorts*) to Messiah.

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5. Vv. 13–16: People who were once enemies, are now united in the Messiah's kingdom and spiritual warfare follows between God's (new) people and their enemies. See Eph. 6:12–17 and 2 Cor. 10:3–5 (spiritual enemies, spiritual weaponry). Notice how the enemy fortresses are "torn down" by the preaching of the gospel. Compare this with the destruction of God's enemies in Is. 11:14–16.
6. Victory in this warfare results in the conversion of new souls to the Messiah's kingdom. The allusion to the highway(s) uniting former enemies (vs. 16) is expanded in Is. 19:16–24.
7. For the union of former enemies, as well as the formation of a new *commonwealth of Israel* compare Is. 2:1–4 with Eph. 2:11–22.