

## Gospel of John Lesson 5

### Review

Some commentators refer to the first half of the gospel as “the book of signs” validating the prologue’s claim. “Sign” is John’s favorite word for something miraculous, and it emphasizes that the main purpose of Jesus’s miracles was to validate what he said. The first sign John cites is that Jesus turned water into wine. Turning water into wine is consistent with OT prophecies associating abundant wine with the Messianic age and divine creative power.

John next recounts how Jesus asserted authority in the temple by driving out people using the temple courts disrespectfully, and that Jesus predicted that the Jewish leadership would try to destroy the “temple,” actually meaning Jesus’s body, but Jesus would rise again in three days. Although John does not say so expressly, the fulfillment of this prophecy—both the attempt to destroy the temple of Jesus’s body, and Jesus’s thwarting of that plan through resurrection, constitute another sign. (Compare John 2:13-22 with Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-48; NIV study Bible pages 1512-14.)

### Outline

Prologue (1:1-18): God exists as three persons, including God the Father who sends God the Son/Jesus/the Word/the Light/the Life into the world to make God known. Many people reject Jesus’s claims, but Jesus gives people who believe him the right to become children of God.

John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the lamb of God, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the one who surpasses John the Baptist, and the Son of God (1:19-33)

Jesus meets 5 disciples and shows a supernatural ability to discern true character (1:35-51)

Jesus turns water into wine. (2:1-11)

During the first Passover of his public ministry, Jesus claims authority over the temple, and predicts that the Jewish leadership will try to destroy the temple, meaning his body, but Jesus will rise again in three days. (2:12-25)

### Nicodemus and birth from above (John 3:1-8)

- “Nicodemus” is described as a “Pharisee” and a member of the “ruling council.” Pharisees were a group that accepted the entire OT canon as inspired and rigorously studied the OT. The “ruling council” likely means the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court. These descriptions imply Nicodemus knew the OT well and was upper class. The contribution he eventually makes to Jesus’s burial indicates he was wealthy.
- “At night” John reports that Nicodemus came to meet Jesus at night. In multiple passages, John associates night with the absence of revelation and/or spiritual ignorance.

(John 9:4, 11:4, 20:1.) John probably mentions “night” here not only because that was literally when Nicodemus visited Jesus, but also to emphasize Nicodemus’s spiritual ignorance despite his theological training, or at least that he is approaching Jesus from a place of spiritual ignorance. Some speculate that Nicodemus came at night to avoid the notice and disapproval of other Jewish leaders. At this early stage of Jesus’s ministry, however, I don’t see enough organized opposition to intimidate someone with Nicodemus’s high social standing, so that seems like a reach to me, but it is a commonly held view.

- “Rabbi” Even though Nicodemus had both formal training and a position recognizing his theological expertise, he respectfully addresses Jesus as “Rabbi” or teacher. Moreover, Nicodemus freely acknowledges that Jesus’s miraculous signs constitute divine validation of Jesus’s teaching. This is a great starting point, but it is less than how John wants his readers to view Jesus. Still, Nicodemus’s effort to come visit Jesus and respectful tone indicate a willingness to learn more about Jesus. The phrase “we know” implies other Pharisees shared Nicodemus’s opinion.
- “Truly, Truly, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born ‘anthen.’” Greek lexicons give the first definition of “anthen” as “from above.” The fourth definition is “again or anew.” Jesus clarifies later in the passage that he means “from above,” an idea consistent with the prologue’s use of “children of God” and “born of God.” (John 1:12-13.) Jesus’s response seems abrupt. One explanation is that John omitted some small talk. Another possibility is that Jesus, with his ability to know someone’s heart, anticipated what Nicodemus would ask and cut to the chase. Pharisees believed in a future resurrection (see Acts 23:6-8), and understood “seeing the kingdom of God” to mean experiencing eternal life. (Dan. 12:2.) One can think of the “kingdom of God” as the realm where God’s authority is recognized and “seeing” that kingdom as being allowed to live in it. Pharisees associated the Messiah’s appearance with the forceful assertion of God’s kingdom or authority on earth.
- “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter into his mother’s womb a second time to be born, can he?” Nicodemus assumes Jesus meant “born again” or “born anew” and further assumes that means physical rebirth. His response is a polite way of saying that Jesus has stated an impossible condition, so that conditions does not seem true. The fact that Nicodemus has completely ignored the first definition (from above) and simply assumed that Jesus meant the fourth definition (again) suggests that being “born from above” is not on Nicodemus’s radar screen as a possible criterion for eligibility to enter the kingdom of God. Like the leaders at the temple, Nicodemus mistakenly assumed Jesus was referring to something material.
- “No one can enter unless. . .” But in contrast to the temple incident, Jesus takes the time to address Nicodemus’s misunderstanding—perhaps because Jesus knows Nicodemus is interested in learning the truth. (See Mark 4:24-25; Matt 26:28-30.) Jesus expands “born from above” to “born of water and the Spirit.” All conservative commentators agree that Jesus’s main point is that any human who wishes to enter the kingdom of God must experience a transformative spiritual birth via the Holy Spirit. That is the meaning of “born from above.” But there is much debate concerning the reference to water. There are three main options (1) the Christian rite of water baptism; (2) natural childbirth; and

(3) an allusion to OT passages associating water with spiritual rebirth. It may seem strange, but the third option makes the most sense to me. One problem with an express reference to water baptism is that Jesus did not institute water baptism as an ordinance signifying redemption in his name before his crucifixion (even though John says later in this chapter that Jesus's disciples performed water baptism, it could not have been identical to the baptism practiced in Acts, which, among other things, symbolizes the believer's identification with Jesus's death and resurrection), yet in John 1:10 Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for not already understanding the need for spiritual birth. This rebuke makes more sense if Jesus was referring to something in the OT than something not yet revealed. A second problem with the water baptism argument is it makes water baptism an essential part of the being born from above. But the rest of the passage explains how the spiritual rebirth occurs and the only condition mentioned is believing in Jesus. If Jesus meant that water baptism was a necessary part of "born from above," one would expect him to mention it in 3:15-18. Seeing it as a reference to physical childbirth has problems, too. One is that there is no evidence Jews referred to physical childbirth as being "born of water." A second is that comparison of 3:3 and 3:5 shows the entire phrase "born of water and the spirit" is parallel to the concept of "born from above"

Jesus was repeating the same concept in different words because Nicodemus thought Jesus meant natural childbirth when Jesus was actually referring to spiritual birth. It would be strange and confusing if Jesus referred to physical childbirth in his expanded restatement of "born from above" unless Jesus was making a clear contrast between the two. In fact, that type of contrast is exactly what Jesus does in John 3:6 when he says "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Jesus's contrast between physical birth and the spiritual rebirth meant by "born from above" in John 3:6 indicates that "born of water" does not refer to physical birth.

There are, however, OT passages that associate water with spiritual birth: Isaiah 44:1-3 and Eze. 36:24-29. In both passages, the Lord provides the life-giving or cleansing water and the beneficial effects of water are metaphors for spiritual birth. Though the connection is not quite as tight, other OT passages also associate life-giving water with the New Covenant. (Isa. 41:17-18; Jer. 31:9; Zech. 14: 8-9.) In Revelation, John portrays these prophecies being fulfilled in New Heavens and Earth. The "river of the water of life" in the New Heavens and Earth provides a concrete representation of the spiritual transformation that Jesus provides to believers through the Holy Spirit. John 4:10-13 and John 7:37-39. So I think the most persuasive meaning of "born of water and the Spirit" is to receive the living water from the Holy Spirit that provides spiritual cleansing and eternal life. To me, it is equivalent to baptism of the Spirit. (Acts 1:4-5.) This does not mean that the rite of water baptism had no place in John's thoughts as he wrote this passage. By the time John wrote his gospel, he had undoubtedly spent many years practicing and reflecting on the rite of water baptism instituted by Jesus. I believe one purpose of water baptism is to provide a concrete experience for a believer signifying the "birth from above." The association of living water with spiritual birth enhances the rich imagery of water baptism.

- “You should not be surprised . . .” Jesus contends that Nicodemus should not be surprised that “being born from above” is required to experience the kingdom of God. This supports the view that the phrases “born from above,” “born of water and the Spirit,” and “born of the Spirit,” are drawn from the OT.
- “The wind blows . . .” The Hebrew and Greek words for “spirit” can also mean either “wind” or “breath,” so Jesus’s analogy with the wind is a fitting illustration of spiritual birth. Jesus argues that people could hear wind and see its effects, and thus no one doubts the reality of wind, but people do not control the wind, nor can they see the wind itself. This implies that spiritual birth is not something visible, but it is no less real than the wind. The analogy to the wind suggests that “birth from above” means something invisible to the human eye, unlike water baptism or physical childbirth.

### **Spiritual birth from above requires faith in the “lifted up” Son of Man (John 3:9-15)**

- “How can this be/happen?” Nicodemus seems perplexed by Jesus’s focus on birth from above as the fundamental requirement for entry into the kingdom of God.
- “You are Israel’s teacher . . .” Jesus points out the irony that someone designated as a spiritual authority in Israel does not understand the fundamental requirement for entry into the kingdom of God. Before providing an explanation, Jesus asserts his theological credentials—he speaks from personal knowledge about things he has seen. At this point, Nicodemus probably did not know what Jesus meant, but those who have read the prologue are aware of Jesus’s heavenly pre-existence and thus Jesus’s personal knowledge of and trinitarian relationship with God the Father, which gives Jesus unique insight concerning the kingdom of God.
- “I have spoken to you of earthly things . . .” Commentators believe “earthly things” means things that happen on earth, including the spiritual birth from above. “Heavenly things” means unrevealed truths about God’s kingdom.
- “No one has gone into heaven . . .” Commentators agree Jesus is saying no other human has ascended to heaven and then descended to earth to explain heavenly truths. This may seem obvious now, but some Jewish writers during the intertestamental period argued that Moses ascended to heaven and returned with the law, so Jesus is disagreeing with that theory. The verse is difficult to translate into English without making it sound like Jesus had already ascended to heaven at this point. Some commentators contend that the Greek conjunction, while difficult to translate, does not mean Jesus had already ascended. Others think John’s quotation of Jesus ends at verse 12, and so verses 13-21 are John’s reflection on Jesus’s comments. If verse 13 is John speaking with the benefit of hindsight, then Jesus’s ascension could be put in the past tense. I prefer the first view because it seems probable that Jesus himself would have provided an explanation to Nicodemus, and so it makes more sense to start John’s comments no earlier than verse 16.
- “the Son of Man” Jesus refers to himself in the third-person as the Son of Man. The ambiguity of this phrase helped Jesus manage when to publicly claim his OT titles.

- “lifted up” The answer to Nicodemus’s “how” question is that the necessary spiritual rebirth from above, and thus entrance into God’s kingdom, is gained by believing the Son of Man, who will be lifted up as a means of deliverance, just as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole as a means of delivering Israelites from poisonous snakes. (Num. 21:6-9.) With hindsight, it is easy to see an analogy between the snake on a pole and Jesus on the cross. As Israelites demonstrated repentance and faith in the Lord by following the Lord’s direction to look at the snake, so Jesus contends that all people must demonstrate repentance and faith in the Lord by relying on Jesus for deliverance from sin. DA Carson points out that “lifted up” is also used at 8:28, 12:32 & 34 to refer to Jesus’s crucifixion. In this context, the literal meaning of the word calls to mind being lifted up on a cross and Jesus’s excruciating suffering, including enduring the scorn of most observers. Figuratively, though, being “lifted up” makes one the center of attention and is associated with exaltation. (Isaiah 52:13; 1 Pet. 5:6.) John implies that Jesus’s exaltation by God the Father includes Jesus’s crucifixion, despite the suffering and worldly scorn involved in that event. Peter encouraged believers not to be dismayed by suffering for their faith because that type of suffering comes with glory. (1 Pet. 4:12-14.)

### **God’s incomparable love for all humanity, and humanity’s decisive choice (John 3:16-21)**

- Who is speaking in 3:16-21? Some commentators think Jesus’s comments continue to verse 21, which is why those verses are sometimes in red font. Others think verses 16-21 are John’s commentary on what Jesus said to Nicodemus. The original texts had no quotation marks so the issue is impossible to resolve definitely, and, if one believes that John wrote the gospel via inspiration and faithfully set forth what he learned from Jesus, whether Jesus said these words to Nicodemus, or whether John was repeating ideas he learned from Jesus, has no impact on the accuracy of the verses. One good argument in favor of 16-21 being John’s commentary is that the phrase “God’s one and only Son” appears in the passage twice, and that is a phrase that John uses (ex. 1:18), whereas in undisputed quotations Jesus uses the terms “the Son” and “Son of God” but not “the one and only Son.”
- “For God so loved the world . . .” John 3:16 beautifully describes the incredible extent of God the Father’s love for the world—i.e., humanity collectively, which is portrayed throughout the gospel as being in rebellion against God’s authority. God the Father so loved sinful humanity that God the Father provided the “one and only” God the Son to make eternal life available to humans who believe in the Son even though humanity collectively does not love or submit to God. (John 3:19; 5:42; 8:42; Rom. 5:6-8.) John 3:16 portrays only two outcomes for humans: obtaining eternal life through belief in the Son; or perishing. The word for perishing could also mean be destroyed. (See also John 12:25; 12:25.) The sequence implies that, but for the gift of the Son, all would perish. This demonstration of God’s love for the world supports God’s claim that He does not want anyone to perish. (Eze. 18:10-13, 23.) God provided a lifeline sufficient to bear any and all who would grab it.
- “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world . . .” Ripped out of context, one could construe this verse to support universal salvation. But the next verse

contends that all those who reject the Son will be condemned, so John is no universalist. Moreover, in John 9:39, Jesus appears to say that he did come into the world for judgment. These issues make 3:17 a difficult verse. John 3:17 emphasizes that, in this first stage of Jesus's ministry, he did not execute judgment on (i.e., condemn) the world. Instead, Jesus focused on the redemptive aspects of his mission, even to the point of allowing people to crucify him. At this point, he was focused on providing the means of salvation, not carrying out condemnation. As the next verses make clear, however, God the Father is still free to pronounce judgment on anyone who does not believe Jesus, and as Revelation makes clear, Jesus is free to carry out judgment when he returns from heaven. (Rev. 19:11-21; Matt. 25:31-46.)

- “Whoever believes in him is not condemned . . .” This verse clarifies that even though God the Father loved the world and made salvation available to all, nevertheless only those who believe the Son escape condemnation. Indeed, John contends that those who do not believe Jesus are condemned “already” based on their failure to accept the Son of God’s authority. I would argue that this verse speaks from God’s perspective, and implies God already knows who will genuinely believe and not believe. (See also John 2:24-25 and 6:64.) From a human perspective, people can appear to believe and turn out not to have genuine faith, such as Judas Iscariot, while other people do not respond to the gospel initially, but later develop genuine faith (ex. Paul).
- “This is the verdict . . .” This could be translated, “this is the basis for judgment” and the basis is that “light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” John contends that humanity has a preference problem, rather than a knowledge problem, and this preference shows itself in evil deeds. The humans in this verse recognize that light has come into the world and nevertheless choose darkness over light. I believe this is similar to the judgment described in John 9:39. Although Jesus does not carry out judgment himself in this initial phase of his ministry, his appearance in the world necessarily leads to judgment by forcing humanity to choose whether to come into the light or remain in darkness. Ironically, for those who reject Jesus, his revelation of God the Father and sacrificial death provide a basis for divine condemnation. (John 9:39-41; 15:22-24.)
- “Everyone who does evil hates the light . . .” John develops the connection between belief and deeds by saying that evil doers hate the light because they fear that entering the realm of light will expose their deeds’ evil nature. Conversely the one who lives by the truth will enter the realm of light and allow his or her deeds to be exposed. The purpose is not to glorify the person, but to show that his or her good deeds have been done “through God” or “in God.” This final clause is a foretaste of the idea that believers’ deeds are not inherently good apart from Jesus. Jesus will later say that believers can do nothing good apart from him. (John 15:5-8.) Paul says some deeds by believers are worthless. (1 Cor. 3:10-15.) Genuine believers should have at least some good deeds performed by God’s grace to display in the light. (John 15:8; 1 John 3:7-8.)

### **John the Baptist again supports Jesus’s claims (John 3:22-36)**

- “After this” The best opportunity for Nicodemus to visit Jesus would have been during Jesus’s stay in Jerusalem for Passover, so John 3:22-36 takes place some unknown amount of time after Passover, including Nicodemus’s visit. John 3:24 states that it “was before John was put in prison.” John 3:24 indicates that the Apostle John was familiar with at least one of the other gospels and wanted to clarify that this event, and probably to at least John 4:47, occurred before the Galilean ministry depicted by the other gospels. This means the events in John Ch. 2-4 probably took place before the Galilean ministry described following Mark 1:14.
- “into Judea” Jerusalem is in Judea, so most commentators understand this to mean Jesus and the disciples left Jerusalem and went into more rural parts of Judea.
- “baptizing” John 3:22 states that Jesus and his disciples were baptizing, but does not specify who performed the baptisms. John 4:2 clarifies that the disciples, not Jesus, performed the baptisms. The other gospels do not discuss these baptisms, and John just mentions it as background, so it is unclear why Jesus’s disciples were baptizing. One possibility is that the purpose was to symbolize repentance, just like John the Baptist. After all, some of Jesus’s disciples had previously been disciples of John the Baptist.
- “Aenon near Salim” The precise location is unknown, but the best candidates are springs within the region of Samaria, which at that time were in the Roman province of Judea. These springs would have been useful to John the Baptist and his followers, because the apostle John reports that people were still “constantly” going to be baptized by John the Baptist and/or his disciples. The comparisons between the baptisms being performed by the groups indicates both were baptizing with water.
- “An argument developed . . .” The argument was between some of John’s disciples and “a certain Jew.” The identity of the person arguing with John’s disciples is unknown. John generally uses the term to refer to the leadership in Jerusalem and/or their spokesperson, so one possibility is that the dispute was between John the Baptist’s disciples and someone from the Jewish leadership. The issue concerned the matter of ceremonial washing. The Apostle John does not provide details because the dispute simply provides the impetus for the issue that he is interested in.
- “he is baptizing and everyone is going to him” It appears that John the Baptist’s disciples went to him to discuss the ceremonial washing issue, and in the course of that discussion, reported that Jesus was baptizing and everyone was going to him. This was an exaggeration on two levels. First, John 4:2 clarifies that Jesus did not personally baptize people; his disciples did. Second, clearly not “everyone” was going to Jesus because John the Baptist was still “constantly” performing baptisms. It is human nature to exaggerate when describing a situation that one is complaining about. The use of exaggeration and John the Baptist’s subsequent rebuke indicates that John the Baptist’s disciples were complaining about the increasing amount of attention paid to Jesus.
- “A man can only receive . . .” John the Baptist is not troubled by this news. He responds with an aphorism or saying: a man can only receive that which God gives. John the Baptist means that God is sovereign, and so the outcomes when one serves God are rightfully determined by God. John the Baptist reminds his followers of his past statement that he was not the Messiah, but was sent ahead to announce the Messiah’s appearance. John

the Baptist analogizes himself to a best man at a wedding who is happy for the groom when the wedding goes well. John concludes that Jesus “must,” meaning it is God’s sovereign plan, increase in importance, while the spotlight moves away from John the Baptist.

- “The one who comes from above . . .” Commentators believe John 3:31-26 is the Apostle John’s reflection on John the Baptist’s testimony, and these verses develop themes from the prologue and the beginning of the chapter. The description of Jesus as the one who comes “from above” reminds the reader of Jesus’s place in heaven where the needed rebirth comes from. Although John the Baptist was a great prophet, he was also a fallen, finite human with a perspective limited by his earthly existence. In contrast, when Jesus talks about God, he is speaking to what he has personally seen and heard. Yet “no one” accepts his testimony. This is clearly rhetorical exaggeration because the next sentence says that the one who has accepted Jesus’s testimony recognizes that God is truthful. As in the prologue, John means that most people do not accept Jesus’s testimony. One might expect John to say that accepting Jesus’s testimony constitutes recognition that Jesus is truthful. John often makes surprising choices when attributing things to members of the trinity. John explains that Jesus is sent by God the Father, speaks the words of God the Father, was given the Holy Spirit without limit by God the Father, and was given all authority by God the Father, and thus accepting what Jesus says to be true is equivalent to recognizing that God the Father is truthful. Jesus is so closely connected to God the Father than when we respond to Jesus, we are also responding to God the Father.
- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life . . .” John ends with a summary of the chapter: whoever believes Jesus has eternal life, indicating believing Jesus is the key to receiving the necessary birth from above. The tense indicates that eternal life is a benefit belonging to a believer when genuine belief occurs. Believers may still experience physical death, but the spirits of those born from above do not ever die. (John 6:40; 10:28; 11:25-26.) Conversely, rejecting or disobeying Jesus precludes eternal life, and one remains in a state of wrath. One implication of “remains” is that fallen humanity’s natural state is to be under the wrath of God, and only escapes that wrath by accepting the salvation provided by God the Father through the gift of the Son.

### **Big Ideas**

God loves all humans, even those actively resisting His authority (See also Jonah 4:10-11; Eze. 18:23, 30-32; Rom. 5:6-8.)

John emphasizes the choice aspects of salvation here and in other passages. (5:24, 39-40; 7:37-38; 11:25-26.) But other passages emphasize divine sovereignty. (John 6:44-45; 6:65, 70-71; 8:24; 13:18; 15:19; 17:2, 6.) Sometimes he mentions both in the same context. (John 6:37-40; 10:25-29, 38; 17:6-8.) John is comfortable strongly expressing both concepts.

John divides humanity into those that choose darkness and those that choose light. Even genuine believers wrestle with the tendency to keep one foot in darkness because there are certain sins we do not want to give up. This passage calls us to fight that tendency and strive to live by the truth by reminding us that continuing to sin amounts to loving darkness rather than light.