

Notes on the Greek New Testament Day 123 – May 3rd – John 3:1-21

Works frequently referenced in these notes on John

Barrett, CK	<i>The Gospel According to John</i> , London, SPCK, 1967
Beasley-Murray, GR	<i>John</i> , <i>Word Bible Commentary</i> , vol 36, Word Books, 1987
Carson, DA	<i>The Gospel According to John</i> , Leicester, IVP (Apollos), 1991

John 3:1 ff.

"The one who 'knew all men', who 'did not need man's testimony about man' (2:24-25), now enters into a number of conversations in which he instantly gets to the heart of individuals with highly diverse backgrounds and needs – Nicodemus (3:1-15), the Samaritan woman (4:1-26), the Gentile official (4:43-53), the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15), and more." Carson.

Verse 1

Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων,
Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων.

Note the link with the previous verses in the echo of the word ἄνθρωπος

ὄνομα, τος n see 2:23

ἄρχων, οντος m ruler, official

Nicodemus would seem to have been a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee and a Rabbi.

Verse 2

οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς καὶ εἶπεν
αὐτῷ· Ῥαββί, οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας
διδάσκαλος· οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ
σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς, ἐὰν μὴ ἢ ὁ θεὸς μετ'
αὐτοῦ.

νυξ, νυκτος f night

"Rabbis are reported to have studied and conversed till late at night... Elsewhere, however (9:4; 11:10; 13:30), νυξ is used with more than literal signification, and, though John may have meant simply that Nicodemus visited Jesus by night for reasons of secrecy (cf. 19:38f.), it is perhaps more probable that he intended to indicate the darkness out of which Nicodemus came into the presence of the true Light (cf. vv. 19-21)." Barrett.

ῥαββι rabbi, teacher, master

His address is a term of respect.

οἶδαμεν "Nicodemus speaks on behalf of others as well as himself. The 'we' may be the Pharisees, or the ἄρχοντες, or both; but it is (in view of the following words) more probable that it refers to the πολλοὶ of 2:23 who believed because they beheld the signs done by Jesus." Barrett.

ἐλήλυθας Verb, perf act indic, 2 s ἐρχομαι

διδασκαλος, ου m teacher

οὐδεὶς, οὐδεμα, οὐδεν no one, nothing

δυναμαι can, be able to

ἐαν if; ἐαν μη except, unless

ἦ Verb, pres subj, 3s εἰμι

"These words, though true, are to John an inadequate expression of faith. They treat Jesus as having essentially the same significance as e.g. Moses (Ex. 3:12, ἐσομαι μετὰ σου) or Jeremiah (Jer 1:19 μετὰ σου ἐγὼ εἰμι τοῦ ἐξαίρεσθαι σε)." Barrett.

Verse 3

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν
λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ
δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

ἀπεκρίθη Verb, aor midd dep indic, 3 s

ἀποκρίνομαι answer, reply, say

γεννηθῆ Verb, aor pass subj, 3 s γεννω be

father of, give birth to; pass be born

ἀνωθεν from above, again

Cf. 1:12-13. "ἀνωθεν is capable of two meanings and here it probably has both. It may mean 'from above', but also 'afresh', 'again'. The birth which is here required is certainly a second birth, but it is not (see v.4) a mere repetition of man's first birth, but a begetting from above, from God." Barrett. Other occurrences of ἀνωθεν in John mean 'from above' (3:31; 19:11, 23).

Beasley-Murray writes, "The concept of being begotten from above is not a simple translation of becoming as a child, but an adaptation of the Jewish hope of a new creation." Cf. Matt 19:28 where Jesus speaks of the kingdom in terms of παλιγγενεσία, 'regeneration.' See also Titus 3:5.

ἰδεῖν Verb, aor act infin ὁραω see,
perceive, recognise

"It is impossible to distinguish between ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ and εἰσελθεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ in v.5. 'To see' means 'to experience'; cf. 3:36, οὐκ ὄψεται ζῶν; also Mark 9:1." Barrett.

The kingdom of God is a characteristic theme of Jesus according to the synoptics but occurs in John only here and in verse 5 – though the kingdom is mentioned also at 18:36 and the theme of Jesus as king occurs frequently in the passion narrative.

Carson comments, "To a Jew with the background and convictions of Nicodemus, 'to see the kingdom of God' was to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal, resurrection life... One of the most startling features of the kingdom announced in the Synoptics is that it is not exclusively future. The kingdom, God's saving and transforming reign, has in certain respects already been inaugurated in the person, works and message of Jesus. John stresses this 'inaugurated' or 'realised' component of the long-awaited salvation even more."

Verse 4

λέγει πρὸς αὐτὸν ὁ Νικόδημος· Πῶς δύναται ἄνθρωπος γεννηθῆναι γέρων ὢν; μὴ δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δευτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι;

γεννηθῆναι Verb, aor pass infin γενναῶ γέρων, οντος m old man, grown man

Would seem to imply that Nicodemus was an old man (perhaps implied also by the fact he was a leader among the Jews) – though the term may be used in a more general sense, meaning 'grown up'.

κοιλία, ας f stomach, womb
δευτερος, α, ον second; a second time

Nicodemus understands ἀνωθεν in the sense of 'again' but does not understand that Jesus also means 'from above'. "Nicodemus understands what has been said to him in purely human terms (cf. v.12, ἐπιγεια); and therefore misunderstands it." Barrett. Nicodemus' reply may express a degree of scorn at the unbelievable words of Jesus.

Verse 5

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.
ὕδωρ, ὕδατος n water

There is some debate over the meaning of the reference here to water. The main views are:

- i) It is a reference to the baptism of John cf. 1:26,33. John's water baptism was preparatory to the coming of the kingdom which cannot be entered apart from the work of (or baptism by) the Spirit (so Bengel, Godet, Westcott). Beasley-Murray cautiously adopts this view, commenting, "Pharisees like Nicodemus should not stand aloof from the call to repentance for the kingdom of God issued by John the Baptist and by Jesus, for *all* stand in need of God's forgiveness and the recreating work of the Holy Spirit, which is as imminent as the kingdom itself."
- ii) The reference is to Christian baptism. Some proponents say these words mean that water baptism is necessary to, but not sufficient for, salvation.
- iii) The reference is to natural (first) birth (so Leon Morris).
- iv) A new begetting of 'water and spirit' refers to the cleansing and renewal spoken of in many places in the Old Testament, pictured there sometimes in terms of water, sometimes in terms of spirit (so Carson). The point, however, is clear: the work of the Spirit is essential to salvation – it is God who saves.

For τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, some cursives and numerous Fathers read τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. This may be due to the known frequency of the expression in Matt, 'to enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23).

Verse 6

τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν.

γεγεννημένον Verb, perf pass ptc, m acc & n nom/acc s γενναῶ

σαρξ, σαρκος f flesh, physical body, human nature

σαρξ and πνεῦμα are not two sides to human nature but represent two contrasting orders of existence – the earthly, from man, and the heavenly, from God.

Verse 7

μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν.

θαυμάσης Verb, aor act subj, 2 s θαυμάζω wonder, be amazed

δεῖ impersonal verb it is necessary, must

Note the plural ὑμας – a response to Nicodemus' "we know" of v.2. Through Nicodemus Jesus addresses those whom he represents. Carson says that the plural is "a strengthening form of the generalising 'anyone' or 'a man' (Gk τις) in 3:3, 5."

Verse 8

τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ, καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.

τὸ πνεῦμα the play on the two meanings of the word, 'wind' and 'spirit', cannot easily be reproduced in English.

ὅπου adv. where

θελω wish, will

πνεω blow (of wind)

φωνη, ης f sound

ποθεν interrog adv. from where

ποῦ interrogative adverb where

ὑπαγω go, go one's way, depart

οὕτως and οὕτω adv. thus, in this way

The work of the Spirit is secret and cannot be observed – though the effects of his work are visible. We cannot ask *how* the Spirit regenerates but we can ask *whether* he has regenerated. "Men cannot in themselves fathom the operation of the Spirit, but the Spirit himself is able to bring them within the sphere of his own activity and impart his own properties to them. Through the Spirit men live not in this age but in the age to come." Barrett. Cf. 1:13.

Verse 9

ἀπεκρίθη Νικόδημος καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι;

ἀπεκρίθη see v.3

"Not, How can these things be? but, How can these things happen?" Barrett.

Verse 10

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις;

διδασκαλος, ου m see v.2

"The article emphasises the status of Nicodemus: the great, universally recognised, teacher." Barrett.

Verse 11

ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι ὅτι ὁ οἶδαμεν λαλοῦμεν καὶ ὁ ἑώρακαμεν μαρτυροῦμεν, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε.

οἶδα know, understand

λαλεω speak, talk

ἑώρακαμεν Verb, perf act indic, 1 pl ὄραω see, observe

μαρτυρεω bear witness, testify

μαρτυρια, ας f testimony, witness, evidence

What is the significance of the plural verbs? Barrett suggests that just as through Nicodemus Jesus addresses all the unbelieving Jews, so here he speaks not for himself alone but also for his disciples – for believers who have known the work of the Spirit. Carson suggests that "Jesus is sardonically aping the plural that Nicodemus affected when he first approached Jesus (v 2)."

Verse 12

εἰ τὰ ἐπίγεια εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε, πῶς ἂν εἶπω ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια πιστεύσετε;

ἐπίγειος, ον earthly, of the earth

εἶπον Verb, aor act indic, 1s & 3pl λεγω

πιστεω believe (in), have faith (in)

ἂν if

εἶπω Verb, aor act subj, 1s λεγω

ἐπουράνιος, ον heavenly

Barrett understands Jesus to mean that he has spoken in parables, in terms of familiar earthly things, and that this should have evoked faith in Nicodemus. If it has not, how will Nicodemus believe if Jesus speaks directly – without earthly illustration – of heavenly things.

Carson thinks that the 'earthly things' may be the new birth, which though 'from above' takes place in the sphere of this present world.

"Jesus says, in effect, that entrance into the kingdom depends absolutely on new birth; if Nicodemus stumbles over this elementary point of entry, then what is the use of going on to explain more of the details of life in the kingdom? The 'heavenly things' are then the splendours of the consummated kingdom, and what it means to live under such glorious, ineffable rule."

Verse 13

καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

οὐδεὶς, οὐδεμία, οὐδεν no one, nothing

ἀναβέβηκεν Verb, perf act indic, 3 s

ἀναβαινω go up, come up, ascend

εἰ μὴ except

Carson argues that εἰ μὴ introduces an exception to the previous idea. Here it should not be translated 'except' (suggesting that Jesus *has* ascended into heaven) but should be translated 'but' or 'but rather,' cf. Rev 21:27 for a similar usage.

καταβάς Verb, aor act ptc, m nom s
καταβαίνω come or go down, descend

No one can go up into heaven to seek to discover God for himself. The only way to know God is through Christ who has come as the revelation of God.

Many authorities add at the end of the verse the phrase 'who is in heaven'; some alter it to 'who *was* in heaven,' and yet others to 'who is *from* heaven.' The omission is supported by P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵ & B L. The early attestation of the shorter reading inclined the UBS editors to follow it.

Verse 14

καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὑψώσεν τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου,

καθως as, just as
ὑψοω exalt, lift up, raise
ὄφης, εως m snake, serpent
ἐρημος, ου f deserted place, desert

Cf. Numb 21:4-9.

οὕτως and οὕτω thus, in this way
ὑψωθῆναι Verb, aor pass infin ὑψοω

Cf. Is 52:13. This verb can be used of Jesus' ascension, but John clearly has the cross in mind (cf. 8:28; 12:32, 34). "He will be lifted up on the cross... and his lifting up will result not only in glory for himself but also in healing for mankind." Barrett.

δει impersonal verb it is necessary, must

"In the Fourth Gospel these themes – the divine revelation, exaltation and the obedient suffering of the Son – constantly congregate around the title 'the Son of Man' (cf. notes on 1:51). He *must* be lifted up: that is the determined purpose of God (cf. Mk 8:31; 10:45). By his being lifted up, Jesus the Son of Man will be returned to the glory he once shared with his Father, while those who turn to him, as the Israelites turned to the bronze snake, will experience new birth." Carson.

Verse 15

ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

"The expression ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ has caused confusion in the textual tradition. The text is read in P⁷⁵ B, whereas P⁶⁶ reads ἐπ αὐτῷ, P⁶³ (apparently) & most MSS read εἰς αὐτόν, and A reads ἐπ αὐτόν. In this Gospel πιστεύειν is [elsewhere] always followed by εἰς (34 times). Both the unusualness and the ambiguity speak for the originality of ἐν αὐτῷ; in that case it must be viewed as an adverbial phrase, linked with ἔχη: 'may in him have life eternal' (so Metzger ... and most recent commentators)." Beasley-Murray.

ζωη, ης f life
αἰωνιος, ον eternal, everlasting

Not just a future 'eternal life' but the life of the age to come which is also a present reality for the one who has come to know Christ the exalted one.

Verses 16-21

Carson argues that vv 16-21 are the Evangelist's explanatory reflections on the words of Jesus that precede. Beasley-Murray similarly speaks of these verses as "A confessional summary of the Gospel."

Verse 16

Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλὰ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

οὕτως and οὕτω see v.8

Emphasises the intensity of the love.

ἀγαπαω love, show love for

"The world as a whole is the object of God's love, but that very fact causes the distinction drawn in v.18 between ὁ πιστευων and ὁ μὴ πιστευων." Barrett.

ὥστε so that, with the result that
μονογενης, ες only, unique

Cf. 1:14, also Gen 22.

ἔδωκεν Verb, aor act indic, 3 s δίδωμι

"Here alone in the Fourth Gospel the love of God for the rebellious *world* is stated to be the reason for the incarnation and death of Christ; more characteristically love for the disciples and the evil of the world are stressed. That is no reason for diminishing the importance of this statement; it is the fundamental summary of the message of this Gospel and should therefore be seen as the background of the canvas on which the rest of the Gospel is painted. Becker points out that this 'comprehensive horizon' appears elsewhere (e.g., 1:7, 9; 12:32), and suggests that the Evangelist consciously resisted the tendency in the Church to isolationism." Beasley-Murray.

ἀπόληται Verb, aor midd subj ἀπολλυμι
destroy; midd be lost, perish, die

Verse 17

οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνη τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ' ἵνα σωθῆ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ.

ἀπέστειλεν Verb, aor act indic, 3 s
ἀποστελλω send, send out
κρινω judge, pass judgement on,
condemn

"The process of judgement is an inseparable concomitant of salvation; no real contradiction is involved when Jesus says that he came both not to judge and to judge." Barrett. Barrett provides a useful summary of the theme of judgement in John.

σωθῆ Verb, aor pass subj, 3 s σωζω save,
rescue, heal

Verse 18

ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.

"The present verse may be regarded as a statement of the negative aspect of the doctrine of justification by faith. The believer (though a sinner) does not come under condemnation; but the absence of faith calls down condemnation upon itself, or, better, is itself an aspect, the subjective aspect, of condemnation. The reason for this is shown in the next verse." Barrett.

ἤδη adv now, already
κέκριται Verb, perf pass indic, 3 s κρινω

"The judgement is already past, but the sentence remains." Barrett.

"Already in need of a Saviour before God's Son comes on his saving mission, this person compounds his or her guilt by not believing in the name of that Son. As with the arrogant critic who mocks a masterpiece, it is not the masterpiece that is condemned but the critic." Carson.

ὄνομα, τος n name, person

Verse 19

αὕτη δὲ ἐστὶν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς, ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα.

Barrett's thinks the words here reflect the predestinarian teaching of this gospel: "Men are divided into two classes, those who do evil and those who do the truth." Barrett's assertion needs to be balanced by the stress on faith drawn out in response to confrontation with Christ (e.g. the *growing* faith of the man born blind in ch 9).

κρισις, εως f judgement, condemnation
φως, φωτος n light

Cf. 1:4.

ἐλήλυθεν Verb, perf act indic, 3 s ἔρχομαι
μᾶλλον adv more; rather, instead
σκοτος, ους n darkness, evil
ἢ or, than
πονηρος, α, ον evil, bad, wicked

Verse 20

πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῆ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ·

φαυλος, η, ον evil, wrong, bad
πρασσω practice, do
μισεω hate
ἐλεγχθῆ Verb, aor pass subj, 3 s ἐλεγχω
show (someone his) fault, show
(something) up for what it is, convict

"The word is used at 16:8 of the activity of the Paraclete, and signifies a convincing exposure." Barrett.

"The verb suggests not only exposure but shame and conviction." Carson.

Some MSS, including P⁶⁶, add to the verse ὅτι πονηρὰ ἐστὶν ('because [or 'that'] they are evil'). There appears to be no obvious reason for the deletion of the phrase; it could have been added from v 19

Verse 21

ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστὶν εἰργασμένα.

ἀληθεια, ας f truth, reality; ἐν ἃ. truly

φανερῶθῃ Verb, aor pass subj, 3 s φανερω
make known, reveal, make evident
εἰργασμένα Verb, perf pass ptc, n nom/acc pl
ἐργάζομαι work, do, perform

What he has done has been done "in union with Him, and therefore by His power."
Westcott. He comes to the light not to show off what he has done but what God has done.

Carson concludes, "The purpose of these three verses, then, is not to encourage readers to think they fall into a deterministic category bound up with their intrinsic nature, but to make them see the imminence of their danger (the verdict is being declared), and the fundamentally moral reasons why people hate the light. John stresses these points in the hope that his readers will beseech God that all they do may be done through him – in short, that they will turn to the 'lifted up' Son of Man with the same simple, desperate, unqualified faith as the Israelites displayed who turned to the bronze snake in the desert (vv 13-15). By such faith and such faith alone can anyone experience the new birth (vv. 3, 5) and thereby gain eternal life (vv 15-16)."