

John 3:1-15

I. First Round – the necessity of the new birth (1-3)

A. Nicodemus approached and spoke to Jesus [admitting sign faith] (1-2)

1. Introduction of Nicodemus (1)

This verse is just background information on Nicodemus, to introduce him into the story. There are three items of information given about him in this verse.

a. And there was a man from the Pharisees (1a)

This proposition mainly serves two functions: First is to introduce Nicodemus, and second to describe him as being a member of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were an influential group of Jewish religious leaders. They were diligent to study and keep the Law of Moses and the traditions that had grown up around the Law. They were serious about faithfulness to God, according to their understanding, and were well regarded by the people. However, Jesus often clashed with them, sometimes over their misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Old Testament, sometimes over their failure to live out what they knew to be true, but most often over their refusal to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament.

There may also be a third function: to contrast Nicodemus with all those men mentioned in the previous passage, to whom Jesus would not entrust Himself. If this is the case, then it introduces that Jesus will reveal more to Nicodemus in the following conversation than He would yet reveal to the larger crowds – that Jesus was more forthright and open to Nicodemus in what follows.

b. Specific description of this man (1b-c)

1) Nicodemus was his name (1b)

This proposition, obviously, gives the name of the man just mentioned as “Nicodemus.”

Beside this passage, Nicodemus shows up in two other places in the New Testament, both in the Gospel of John. In 7:50, Nicodemus, in a sense, attempted to defend Jesus before the ruling council by suggesting they follow the correct legal standard of not condemning anyone before they are given a fair hearing. His suggestion was quickly shut down, not by proper legal procedure, but by personal abuse. Then, in 19:39, Nicodemus accompanied Joseph of Arimathea in burying the corpse of Jesus after the crucifixion. In this passage, John does not specifically label Nicodemus as a disciple, even though in the same passage we are explicitly told that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple, although a secret disciple because of fear.

Therefore, there is speculation whether Nicodemus ever became a true disciple of Jesus. There is evidence that he was heading in that direction, and it is very plausible that he would have become a disciple, but kept it hidden for fear of the other Jewish leaders. But there is not enough evidence given for us to be sure. And John may have intended to leave this question unanswered in order to tease his readers into considering the state of their own discipleship.

2) A ruler/leader of the Jews (1c)

Nicodemus was also a leader of the Jews, likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council in Jerusalem. Not all members of the Sanhedrin were Pharisees, and not all Pharisees were rulers. But Nicodemus was both. He was very influential both politically and religiously. This may have been an occasion for pride and/or haughtiness in Nicodemus. And, as will be seen in the following dialogue, Jesus purposely, but gently, deflated Nicodemus’s pride and pretense to authority.

2. Nicodemus admitted sign faith to Jesus (2)

a This one came to Him [Jesus] at night (2a)

Nicodemus was the one who initiated this encounter with Jesus. In context, this is certainly because of the signs that Jesus had done in Jerusalem, and His encounters with the Jewish leaders, as narrated in the previous chapter of John.

John noted that this encounter happened at night, but did not explain why. In some cases (such as 13:30), there is reason to believe that John intended “night” as an indication of evil according to his thematic contrast between light and darkness, but there is no strong evidence that he intended this contrast here. It may be that Nicodemus sought Jesus at night because he wanted to meet in secret. This is at least plausible, especially in light of John’s emphasis elsewhere of many people who believed in Jesus, but kept it hidden for fear of the Jewish leaders. But John does not explicitly say that this was the reason in this verse, and so it remains conjecture. It is just as plausible that Nicodemus came at night because this was a time when they could meet privately without the press of crowds and other obligations. There is nothing in this passage that will let us settle this issue one way or another.

b He said, we are willing to admit sign faith (2b-g)

1) And he said to Him (2b)

This is a discourse formula, obviously introducing the content of the discourse and clarifying who is speaking. This kind of formula will occur throughout this passage, serving to clarify who is speaking, and introducing the content of what they say.

2) We have determined by your signs that you are from God (2c-g)

a) We know you are from God (2c-e)

(1) Rabbi, we know that (2c)

Nicodemus addressed Jesus as “Rabbi” which means “teacher.” This term refers to a recognized authority in the Jewish religion, and it is a high complement for him to address Jesus with this title. Jesus did not go through the standard religious training of that culture, and was not officially accredited by their standards or procedures. But He had proven Himself to be so knowledgeable and effective in teaching that most people recognized Him as a qualified Rabbi.

In one sense, the phrase “we know that...” is just a discourse formula, introducing the content of what Nicodemus wanted to communicate. On the other hand, there are a few underlying assumptions in the way he introduced this. First, he used the plural term “we.” This was most likely in reference to his standing as a ruler of the Jews and was intended to convey that he represented the official opinion and authority of the Jewish leaders. Some modern business management books contain instructions on how to start a meeting in such a way as to “establish dominance” i.e. subtly or explicitly define the roles and levels of power and authority in such a way as to set up for success in the meeting. It is possible that Nicodemus approached Jesus with such an attitude. In other words, Nicodemus probably meant well, and opened with a friendly gesture. But at the same time, he brought some assumptions and presumptions, and gave the air of condescending to Jesus as one who had authority over Him, not as an equal, as demonstrated in the content below.

(2) What he claimed to know (2d-e)

(a) You have come from God (2d)

Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus was from God. Many of the Pharisees argued the opposite later in the Gospel of John. Jesus being sent from God is a major theme of John’s Gospel. So, Nicodemus is definitely on the right track, and has correctly identified Christ, so far.

(b) As/to be a teacher (2e)

Nicodemus also acknowledged Jesus as a bona fide teacher. As mentioned earlier, Jesus did not go through the recognized process, and Nicodemus may be attempting to give official recognition to Jesus.

All of this is good on the part of Nicodemus, and should be seen as coming from genuine good will. However, seen in light of the larger narrative and purposes of John's Gospel, this is definitely not enough. First, Jesus never asked for official recognition from the Jewish leaders, and later in this Gospel will explicitly deny that He needs or wants their approval, sanction, or human testimony, because His approval, sanction, and testimony comes from His Father. And second, for John the author, to acknowledge Jesus as a teacher is good, but not enough. John's (and Jesus') desire, according to the purpose statement of this Gospel (20:31), is that people would believe in Jesus as the Christ (Messiah) and the Son of God. So, for Nicodemus to acknowledge Jesus as a teacher was partway there, but he was not yet to the point of recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God

b) Because the signs prove you are from God (2f-g)

These propositions are the reason Nicodemus gave for his conclusion that Jesus had come from God. They are in the form of a logical argument of excluding a conclusion unless a specific premise was true and present. And then arguing that since the conclusion was evident and proven, then the premise must be proved true and present. Jesus will use this same form of logic in responding to Nicodemus in 3d-e below.

(1) For no one is able to do these signs which you are doing (2f)

Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus had done miraculous signs. This was taken as a given. And then he stated that this would not be possible without the supposition given in the next proposition

(2) Except if God was with him (2g)

Nicodemus stated that this supposition is the only possible explanation of Jesus' ability to perform His signs. And he concluded that since Jesus did in fact do signs, then this explanation must indeed be the case. Or to reverse the logic: Jesus did signs > God's presence with Him is the only possible explanation > therefore, God is present with Him. Throughout John's Gospel, he describes people who believe in Jesus to a certain level because they saw His signs. This is what I have labeled "sign faith." At this point in the narrative, Nicodemus professed a level of "sign faith." Sign faith is a good thing, and John never speaks against it. However, as John emphasizes throughout the rest of the Gospel, "sign faith" is intended to be a stepping stone toward deeper, saving faith, which believes in Jesus as Christ and Son of God, and which results in the gift of eternal life. Therefore, to stop at "sign faith" ONLY, without moving to a higher level of faith, is a bad thing. At this point in the narrative, it could go either way for Nicodemus, and John seemed to leave it ambiguous throughout the rest of the Gospel whether Nicodemus stayed with "sign faith" or went on to genuinely believe. But one thing is clear, which is also seen throughout John's Gospel: Jesus never allows people to stay at only "sign faith." He always pushes them toward genuine faith that recognizes Him as the Son of God. Some people respond to this prodding and believe, and some people are pushed away. But Jesus never allows them to stay undecided with a halfway faith.

B. Jesus responded [challenging him to new birth] (3)

1. Jesus answered and said to him (3a-b)

These two propositions are a discourse formula signaling a change of speaker and introducing the content of the speech that follows. The use of these two statements together – “he answered” and “he said” – reflects a typical Jewish way of narrating conversations, as seen many times in the Old Testament. But there is also a specific emphasis in each of the two propositions. In the first, the emphasis is that it is spoken in response to what had been said earlier. And in the second, the emphasis is on introducing the content that follows. This same two-part formula will occur again in 9a-b and 10a-b.

a Jesus answered (3a)

b And He said to him (3b)

2. I seriously assert that you need the new birth to experience the Kingdom (3c-e)

a Truly, Truly, I am saying to you (3c)

This proposition does not function as a discourse formula. John has already introduced Jesus’s speech in the previous propositions. And no one needs to be told that you are speaking to them when you are speaking to them. Rather, this statement functions as an affirmation, to emphasize the truth, seriousness and importance of what is about to be said. It is literally the repetition of a word meaning “certainly” to stress the certainty of what is about to be spoken. It functions as a verbal highlighter, to alert the hearer to pay special attention to the following statement. Jesus uses this type of affirmation many times, especially in John’s Gospel (see v. 5, 11).

b No one can see the Kingdom unless they are born again/from above (3d-e)

In these propositions, Jesus mimicked the logical structure of argument that Nicodemus used in 2f-g. Nicodemus said that the only possible way to do miraculous signs is for God to be with you. Jesus responded by saying that the only possible way to see the Kingdom of God is to be born again/from above. The conclusion is that the new birth is absolutely necessary in order to experience God’s Kingdom.

As typical in John’s Gospel, Jesus seemed to not directly respond to what Nicodemus said. At first, it may seem that often Jesus completely ignored what people said and totally changed the subject of conversation. But on closer inspection, we see that in each case, Jesus moved past the surface issue presented by people, and went directly to the underlying root issue at the heart of the conversation. Jesus was, in essence, saying to Nicodemus, “OK, if you trust that I am a teacher from God, I will teach you what is most urgent for your relationship with God.” Jesus stressed that the approval of Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin didn’t matter to Him. Rather, what really mattered was the evaluation that God had of Nicodemus, and the necessity for it to be changed by the new birth. Jesus ignored Nicodemus’s flattery, and cut to the heart of the issue.

1) Except if he is born again/from above (3d)

The term “born” is passive, and it refers to the male parent’s part in procreation. It is the same term John used in 1:12-13 to refer to becoming children of God. The emphasis in both of these passages is that this is something people are not able to do or cause for themselves, but it is the result of what someone else has caused in and for them. Just as we did not cause our natural birth, Jesus’s words clarify that we do not cause this birth. This new birth is the work of God in conversion. The new birth is also mentioned in 1 Jn 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, 18, Titus 3:5 and 1 Pet. 1:3, 23.

The term usually translated “again” is ambiguous and has two main possible meanings. It could mean “again” referring to a repeating of a previous action. Or it could mean “from above” referring to the source of an action. It is used in this second sense in 19:23 and Matt. 27:51 to refer to something happening from the top to the bottom. And it is used in this second sense in 3:31 and 19:11 to mean from heaven above. In this verse (and again in v. 7) John probably intended a double meaning at least partly encompassing both of these shades of meaning. Because this birth is indeed

something new, so it is as a second birth. It is to experience a complete change in one's life. And the entire New Testament proclaims that our past is not necessarily our destiny. There is the possibility of a dramatic change, of a new start in Jesus. We can start over by the conversion which Christ brings. However, the emphasis in this passage is that this birth comes from above, it is from God, it is supernatural, as will be developed in the following verses.

As Leon Morris suggested, it would be appropriate to translate this term "reborn from above" in order to cover the entire range of meaning, and to leave the ambiguity. And it is the ambiguity of this term that explains Nicodemus's misunderstanding of what Jesus said, as seen in his objection to Jesus's statement in v. 4

2) No one is able to see the Kingdom of God (3e)

The Kingdom of God is the rule of God. It is not so much a place as it is the dynamic of God exercising His sovereign rule, which brings about all goodness, justice, and blessing. God is always ruling, and every part of history and every part of the universe is under His ruling control. However, He has chosen for a time to exercise His rule less directly and allow things that are against His revealed will for the sake of a larger purpose bringing about His eternal will. There are examples of God more immediately exercising His rule (especially in the life and ministry of Jesus), but there is also a promised time, when God will completely, explicitly bring about His Kingdom rule, completely free of evil, sin, and injustice. So, the Kingdom of God refers partly to the experience of blessing and goodness from God's activity in this life, but especially to the eternal blessedness of the age to come. See my New Testament Survey course for further discussion on the concept of the Kingdom of God.

This (including v. 5) is the only place in John's Gospel where he uses the phrase "the Kingdom of God." This term is used extensively in the Synoptic Gospels. In many of the places where the synoptics use this term, John uses the phrase "eternal life" as a parallel term and idea.

The current Jewish thought in Jesus's day assumed that all Jews except blatant apostates and evildoers were already participants in God's Kingdom and would experience the eternal blessedness of the next age. Jesus turned the tables on that assumption and said that we should assume no one is participating and will participate in the Kingdom unless they first experience the new birth. This kind of language would have been thought to be appropriate when applied to a Gentile entering into the Jewish faith. But for Jesus to apply this kind of need for a radical restart to a person like Nicodemus (a Pharisee and ruler, presumed to be at the height of religious attainment) would have been offensive to him. And yet, that is precisely what he needed most.

The phrase "see the Kingdom" is probably a more generic expression meaning to experience the Kingdom in a yet unidentified way. However, in v. 5, Jesus used the phrase "enter into the Kingdom." So, to see the Kingdom may represent a lesser experience than fully entering the Kingdom.

And Jesus's qualification may also be in response to Nicodemus's claim to "know" things about Jesus. Jesus may be saying, in essence, "you have no ability to know about me, and you will not be able to 'see' anything of the truth about me until you have experienced the new birth."

II. Second Round – the supernatural manner of the new birth (4-8)

A. Nicodemus misunderstood and scoffed at Jesus's claim (4)

1. Nicodemus said to him (4a)

This is just a discourse formula, signaling a change of speaker, and introducing what he said.

2. What he said: How can someone be born again? (4b-e)

a How can a grown man be born? (4b-c)

1) How is a man able to be born? (4b)

With this statement, Nicodemus was not questioning HOW this new birth could take place (he will ask that question in v. 9). He was expressing his doubt that what Jesus said was true and valid. He was not questioning about how Jesus's statement was true; he was questioning whether Jesus's statement was true. He doubted that a man was able to be born again.

Remember that the term "born again" may mean born AGAIN or born FROM ABOVE. Nicodemus has clearly assumed Jesus to mean the first sense without considering the possibility of the second sense. And this is the cause of the misunderstanding, because Jesus will later show that His emphasis was on the second sense.

2) Even though he is old (4c)

The focus of this phrase is probably not so much the relative age (old, as opposed to a younger adult), but it is that a person had already been born once, and naturally could not repeat the process, as elaborated in the next propositions. However, there could be a sense that Nicodemus is expressing doubt over someone being able to experience such dramatic change because they had become set in their ways. Similar to the statement "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," Nicodemus may be saying, "It is too late for me, I'm a ruler and a Pharisee. I am unable or unwilling to go along with whatever you are asking."

b How can a man be born a second time? (4d-e)

These propositions could be giving the reason for Nicodemus's doubt expressed in the previous propositions, i.e. "a man cannot be born when old, BECAUSE he cannot enter into his mother's womb again." Or these may just be a restatement of the same kind of doubt in different words, i.e. "a man cannot be born when old, THAT IS, he cannot enter into his mother's womb again."

1) Is he not able to enter a second time into his mother's womb? (4d)

Nicodemus knew that this was an absurd suggestion, and he did not seriously think that Jesus was proposing this. Rather, he thought he was showing Jesus's statement to be absurd by pushing it to its logical consequence. However, this does not prove that Jesus's statement is absurd. It just proves that Nicodemus had not really understood what Jesus was saying, because he did not consider that Jesus meant "born from above," referring to a supernatural birth. The words "a second time" show that Nicodemus thought that Jesus only meant "born again" and not "born from above."

And by the way, the North American church often makes the same mistake, which is why we so often miss the significance of these verses. This explains why so many people claim to be "born again" but live no differently than their secular neighbors. They think (because they have been told) that all we have to do is pray a prayer, etc. and we will change our own life and get a fresh start. But we miss the fact that this new birth is "from above" and is a miracle that we cannot do for ourselves. It is natural for humans to believe that we can somehow do something to earn favor with God and restore or at least improve our standing. In this passage, Jesus clearly denied that this is possible.

2) And be born? (4e)

Again, Nicodemus did not misunderstand in the sense that he thought Jesus was suggesting this. Rather, he did not really understand what Jesus was saying at all, and therefore scoffed at the whole thing, especially at the idea that anyone like Nicodemus would need to change, would need to be converted in any way. Nicodemus refused to take any idea like that seriously.

B. Jesus responded [explaining new birth] (5-8)

1. Jesus answered (5a)

This is another discourse formula, noting the change of speaker and introducing the content of His speech.

2. The New Birth is from God, not under human control (5b-8)

a Truly, truly, I am saying to you (5b)

This is the same phrase as 3c above. See the comments there.

b The new birth is supernatural and beyond human control (5c-8)

1) The new birth is supernatural (5c-7)

a) A supernatural birth from God is necessary (5c-6)

(1) Without supernatural birth, no one can enter the Kingdom (5c-d)

These two propositions are almost the same as 3d-e except for a few notable word changes described below. Jesus restated His assertion of the need for the new birth. But He did it in a way that also clarified the supernatural nature of this new birth.

(a) Except if someone is born from water and spirit (5c)

The phrase “born from water and spirit” parallels the phrase “born again/from above” in 3d. And therefore, this phrase further defines and clarifies what Jesus meant by using the earlier phrase. And this begs the question, “What does it mean to be born from water and spirit?”

The best answer to this question is that it is a reference to the Old Testament. In verse 10, Jesus will criticize Nicodemus for not understanding, even though he is a teacher of Israel. So, Jesus expected him to understand His reference, because it came from the Old Testament Scripture.

“Water” often refers to cleansing and forgiveness in the Old Testament. And “Spirit” most often refers to God and His activity. And God often promised that He would pour out His Spirit. But “spirit” also refers to the part of humanity that primarily connects with God. And God promised to give His people a new spirit at the renewal.

The place in the Old Testament where “water” and “spirit” are used together most closely is Ezekiel 36: 25-27. It is “Ezekiel 36:25-27, where water and spirit come together so forcefully, the first to signify cleansing from impurity, and the second to depict the transformation of heart that will enable people to follow God wholly.” (Carson, [The Gospel According to John](#), p. 195)

This passage is in the context of God’s promise to bring His people back from Babylon. But the promise was not just for return to the promised land. It concentrated mostly on the restoration of the national character and blessings. In this passage, God promised to cleanse them with water from all their impurities (v. 25), to give them a new heart and a new spirit (v. 26), and to give them His Spirit, so that their hearts and lifestyles will be changed (v. 27). And then, God restated the regular promise of restored relationship, that He would be their God, and they would be His people (v. 28). All of these are typical promises that are stated throughout the Old Testament, but in this passage, they are all brought together as

a summary of what God would do in restoring His people to relationship with Himself and bringing about the fullness of His Kingdom blessings. This passage in Ezekiel is a shorthand summary of all that God would supernaturally do to change and restore His people, so that they would be what He had created them to be.

And by using the words “born of water and spirit” Jesus was making a reference to this Ezekiel passage and all of its significance, and He expected Nicodemus, as an Old Testament scholar, to be able to recognize the reference. In other words, to be born of water and spirit is to experience all of the supernatural renewal that God had promised in order to change and restore His people back to right relationship with Him. Without experiencing this supernatural work, no one will be able to enter the Kingdom of God, because without renewal from God, no one is worthy to be a part of God’s Kingdom.

(b) **He is not able to enter into the Kingdom of God (5d)**

This proposition is the same as 3e above, except that the word “see” has been changed to “enter.” This may just be a stylistic difference with no real difference in meaning. If there is any difference, “to enter” would signify a fuller experience of the Kingdom than merely to see it. But those who are born again/from above by water and spirit will both see and enter the Kingdom, and those who are not, will neither see nor enter the Kingdom.

(2) **Reason: Only a supernatural source can cause a supernatural result (6)**

These propositions give the reason for the statements Jesus made in 5c-d. People need birth from the supernatural source signified by “water and spirit” because only a supernatural source can produce the supernatural result needed in order to enter the Kingdom of God. In these propositions, Jesus contrasted two results, based on their two sources. The point is that the kind of result automatically flows from the kind of source. If you need a supernatural result, you cannot get it from a natural source. The kind of birth Jesus was talking about was not the natural birth that Nicodemus referred to. Rather, it was a different kind altogether. Natural birth was not enough for someone to experience the Kingdom life. A supernatural conversion is necessary. Flesh, all human religious activity and attainment, is not enough, because at best, it can only produce human life. It is never able to produce eternal life. Only a supernatural work of God can produce eternal life. And that is exactly what is promised throughout John’s Gospel. But Nicodemus needed (and we need) to be confronted with the fact that he could not attain it on his own.

(a) **The thing being born from the flesh is flesh (6a)**

“being born” is the same word used above (likewise in the next proposition) and has the connotation of being produced by another.

“Flesh” is shorthand for everything merely human. This sometimes has the connotations of sinfulness, but not necessarily in all cases, and probably not in this verse. It always has the connotation of weakness and inability to attain to anything beyond the merely human. The Kingdom of God cannot be experienced by human attainment because humanity is far too limited to ever attain to God’s Kingdom. Natural humanity cannot bring about conversion. Natural humanity cannot bring about the Kingdom. Natural humanity cannot even see the Kingdom.

(b) And the thing being born from the Spirit is spirit (6b)

“Spirit” when contrasted with flesh has the connotation of being in the supernatural sphere of God and not merely in the human sphere. It signifies ability and power as opposed to weakness and inability because it is connected with God Himself. In conversion, the Spirit of God brings forth this new spiritual nature in humans. It is not just a fixing up of ordinary human nature. It is giving something new and supernatural. It is a new birth of a new kind of life in the new believer. The Kingdom of God can only be experienced by God’s power and working. As Jesus will say in a few verses, no one is able to go up to heaven, but heaven can come down to us.

b) Implication: You should not be surprised at the need for a supernatural birth (7)

(1) Do not be astonished (7a)

This proposition indicates that Nicodemus had been shocked by what Jesus had said, but Jesus expressed that he should not have been shocked. As He will say in a few verses, Nicodemus should have known these things because he was a teacher of Israel. He should have known the promises in the Law and the Prophets that God would undertake to decisively renew His people and bring about His Kingdom rule in a way that humans could not do on their own. This is the central hope for which Israel was waiting at that time. One of the biggest mistakes of the Pharisees is that they thought righteousness was within their reach – that they were able to keep the law and be pleasing to God, and to make themselves worthy of being in right relationship with God. This is the same mistake that every human makes until they are convinced of the Gospel. Humans default to the idea of works religion, and it is so hard for us to grasp the true grace with which God has given righteousness to His people through Christ. As Jesus said elsewhere, until we realize that we are sick, we do not see our need for a physician. Until we see our complete inability on our own, we do not see our need for the new birth.

(2) Because I claimed a supernatural birth is necessary (7b-c)

(a) Because I said to you (7b)

This introduces the reason Nicodemus was shocked. It was not primarily that Jesus had spoken, but the content of what He said, which is shown in the next proposition

(b) It is necessary for you to be born again/from above (7c)

This proposition closely echoes 3d above, as Jesus is paraphrasing what He had just said. But here He made the logic of 3d-e more explicit in claiming that the new birth from above is a necessity, and that is what He had said above: no one can see the Kingdom without it.

The necessity of the new birth was a shocking statement to Nicodemus, not only for the reasons given above in the comments on 7a, but also because he was a religious leader with high standing. He probably could have imagined that many of the lower classes of people needed the new birth. But he was so sure of his own accomplishment and status that he thought it outrageous for Jesus to suggest that he himself needed to be born again. Jesus cared enough to tell Nicodemus the truth, even though it was distasteful for him to hear.

2) The new birth is beyond human control and understanding (8)

a) The wind is beyond human control and understanding (8a-f)

(1) The wind is not under human control (8a-c)

(a) The wind blows without our influence (8a-b)

(i) The wind blows (8a)

This almost certainly introduces another of John's wordplays and double meanings. The word translated "wind" is the same word translated "spirit" elsewhere (such as 8g). The word can have either meaning, and John is probably playing on this ambiguity by using an illustration of the natural phenomenon of wind to explain about the supernatural activity of God's Spirit in conversion. Jesus drew attention to the wind blowing, something that everyone has observed.

(ii) Wherever it wills (8b)

The point that Jesus made about the wind is that it blows on its own, when and where it does without our control or input. The wind is completely outside of our control.

(b) And you hear its sound (8c)

Even though the wind is outside of our control, we experience its effects. Jesus pointed out the sound of the wind as one effect that we can know.

(2) The wind is beyond human understanding (8d-f)

(a) But you do not know (8d)

Not only is the wind beyond our control, Jesus went on to point out that the wind is beyond our full understanding. We don't know many things about the wind. Yes, modern people probably know more about pressure systems, and the physics behind the wind than Jesus's first hearers. But we can only know about the general principles that cause the wind. The wind is unpredictable. We still cannot know the particulars about any wind that we experience on any particular day, as Jesus pointed out more specifically in the next propositions.

(b) How the wind works (8e-f)

(i) from where it is coming (8e)

(ii) and where it is going (8f)

Jesus was not saying here that we can't determine that the wind is blowing "from the North" or blowing "to the South" for example. This lack of knowledge of the wind parallels our lack of control. We can only know the general direction of the wind (which is constantly changing), and not the particulars of the where, when, and why of the weather. That is why even modern weather forecasts are the brunt of jokes about their inaccuracy. Some say that a butterfly flapping its wings in China can ultimately cause a hurricane in the Atlantic. The weather is far too complicated and unpredictable for us to fully understand. In any case, Jesus is just stating a general principle about our relationship to the weather in order to make a point about conversion in the next proposition.

b) In the same way is everyone having been born from the Spirit (8g)

In this proposition, Jesus explained the point of the illustration He had been making about the wind. Just like we cannot control or understand the wind, and we only know the wind from its results (we don't actually ever see the wind, we only see the trees swaying or the dust moving across the ground, etc.), in the same way, the work of the Spirit in conversion is supernatural. The Spirit's work in conversion is unpredictable. We don't control the Spirit's work in conversion. We don't understand the Spirit's work in conversion. We may not even see the immediate work of the Spirit, or know precisely when and how He is working in conversion. But we can tell from the effects. A changed life is the sure sign of the new birth. We may not know how and when the Spirit was working, but we can see the signs that the Spirit had been working when someone is born from the Spirit.

This may be a reference to Ezekiel chapter 37, to the account of the valley of dry bones, which follows directly after the passage in Ezekiel chapter 36, which Jesus referenced in v. 5. In that passage, a multitude of dry human skeletons were miraculously reassembled and then brought back to life when the Spirit of God, coming from the four winds gave them new life. In Ezekiel, this was a symbolic vision representing the restoration of the nation of Israel. And it would make perfect sense to also apply it as an analogy for conversion, whereby God's Spirit gives spiritually dead people new life into His family.

In this proposition, Jesus said the same thing He had been saying in a different way. The new birth had been described as being "born again/from above," and being "born from water and spirit." Here Jesus described it as being "born from the Spirit." Remember that the word translated "wind" is the same as the word translated "Spirit." In 1:13, John promised that people could be "born from God." And here, the same thing is said to be from the Spirit (Who is God). Every one of these descriptions of the new birth point to its supernatural origin and nature. Only God can bring about the new birth. It is beyond our control. It is beyond our understanding. But it is real, and we can see its results. And we desperately need the new birth, or we will not experience God's Kingdom.

III. Third Round – the supernatural agent of the new birth (9-15)

A. Nicodemus misunderstood and questioned Jesus's claims (9)

1. Nicodemus responded (9a-b)

This is almost the same as 3a-b (see the comments there) except it is signaling the shift of speakers back to Nicodemus.

a Nicodemus answered (9a)

b And he said to Him (9b)

2. How are these things able to be? (9c)

This response is a bit ambiguous. It may still contain a sense of skepticism and unbelief. But there is also at least some shift to genuine inquiry into how the new birth can happen. Nicodemus asked "how?" i.e. "in what manner can these things possibly take place?" He was not just asking if they could take place, but how it would happen if they did take place, thus signaling at least some openness to the possibility that they could take place.

B. Jesus Responded [Only a supernatural Savior can save] (10-15)

1. Jesus answered Nicodemus (10a-b)

This is yet again another discourse formula signaling a change of speaker and introducing what He said. This is exactly the same wording as 3d-e. See the comments for that verse.

a Jesus answered (10a)

b And He said to him (10b)

2. What Jesus said: The supernatural savior is the only one who can save (10c-15)

As seen earlier (e.g. v. 3), Jesus seemed, at first, to not directly answer Nicodemus's question (though He later would in vv. 14-15). But Jesus cut to the heart of the issue – the most important topic. Nicodemus asked “how?” and Jesus answered “Who.” Who brings the new birth is the most important issue, and once we know Who, we are better able to understand how. But first, Jesus criticized him for not knowing these things.

a Jesus confronted Nicodemus's lack of understanding (10c-12)

1) Criticism of Nicodemus: He should know these things, but he doesn't (10c-d)

Technically, these two propositions are in the form of a question. However, it is a rhetorical question, showing shock and disappointment that it was indeed the case, but not questioning whether it was the case. Nicodemus earlier employed a question that was really a statement of his own skepticism. Here Jesus employed a question that was really a statement of His criticism and rebuke for Nicodemus's response.

a) You are the teacher of Israel (10c)

Jesus validated that Nicodemus had the role of scholar and teacher. Elsewhere, Jesus acknowledged the Pharisees and told the people to listen to their teaching, but warned them not to follow their example. In many encounters with the Pharisees, Jesus agreed with most of their teaching, but He said that they missed the most important concept, which is Him, because all the Scriptures pointed to Him.

b) And you don't know these things? (10d)

Jesus is making the same kind of criticism of Nicodemus personally. He knew the Scriptures well in the sense that he knew what they said. But Jesus expressed disappointment that he did not know the Scriptures in the sense of grasping their overall message and significance. Nicodemus failed to understand and internalize the promises of Ezekiel ch. 36, and so he had not understood what Jesus was talking about. Nicodemus did not grasp that God was a gracious, rescuing God Who does not need our input and activity in order to bring about new life and reconciliation. Jesus will elaborate on this concept in the next few verses.

Because the Pharisees concentrated so much on what humans are supposed to do, they often lost sight of what God promised to do. Without God, all human effort is worthless. And so, Nicodemus, even though he was an Old Testament scholar, had missed the point of the Old Testament.

This conversation began with Nicodemus asserting his position and ability to evaluate Jesus and His ministry. Here Jesus turned the tables and asserted His ability to evaluate Nicodemus's ministry. And He found it lacking and put Nicodemus in his place. But this was not a harsh put down. Rather, it was a gracious invitation to recognize his lack and learn the truth, and so find the true life he had been pursuing in a zealous but mistaken fashion.

2) Reasons for criticizing Nicodemus: He refuses to learn and believe (11-12)

a) Nicodemus is confronted with his inability/unwillingness to learn (11)

(1) Truly, Truly, I am saying to you that: (11a)

This is the same formula and wording as 3c and 5a above. See the comments on 3c. The rest of vv. 11-12 is the content of what Jesus was strongly asserting.

(2) Nicodemus was refusing to learn from Jesus (11b-d)

(a) Jesus is knowledgeable and qualified to teach (11b-c)

(i) We are saying what we know (11b)

Notice that Jesus used the plural pronoun “we” in His response. This is likely in reference to Nicodemus’s use of the same pronoun in his initial statement to Jesus. Just like Nicodemus claimed to be speaking for the Jewish leaders, Jesus responded that He was speaking for the One with much more authority. And He said that He was telling what He knew. Jesus, because He is God, and was sent from God, and was speaking for God, He had all knowledge. He is the source of all knowledge, and so, is extremely qualified to teach.

(ii) And we are testifying what we have seen (11c)

As Jesus will develop later in John’s Gospel, He spoke as He heard from the Father, and He did what He saw the Father doing. The Father reveals all things to the Son, Who then reveals them to the world. Again, Jesus is claiming that the source of His knowledge and authority and testimony is God – the ultimate source of all knowledge, authority, and truth.

(b) And you are not receiving our testimony (11d)

Anyone with any sense at all would listen to the One speaking from the ultimate source of all knowledge. And if what Jesus had just said is true (which it is), then Nicodemus should have wholeheartedly believed it and accepted it. But Nicodemus responded with doubt, misunderstanding, and skepticism. And so, Jesus criticized him for his lack of reception to something so precious and true. And this also pressed Nicodemus to recognize that Jesus was indeed sent from God, as Nicodemus had earlier claimed to believe. But his refusal to believe what Jesus said, and his refusal (so far) to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God showed that Nicodemus did not yet believe as he should.

b) Nicodemus is confronted with his inability/unwillingness to believe (12)

This verse is partly a restatement of the same kind of idea as in v. 11. But it also shows the conclusion, the inference from that verse. Nicodemus did not receive the testimony of the One with all knowledge even about simple earthly issues. Therefore, he is not (yet) able to understand and receive His testimony on supernatural heavenly things like the new birth. Verse 12 is obviously an *if-then* condition, made up of two conditional types of relationships. 12a-b are the *if* condition of 12c-d. And 12a is the historical given condition which resulted in Nicodemus’s response of 12b. That response was not the only possible response, and was conditional on Nicodemus. And 12c and 12d are in an explicit *if-then* relationship. But in context, the response of 12d is a rhetorical statement in the form of a question. This shows that Jesus assumed an assured effect in 12d based on the condition of 12c. The point of this verse is to challenge Nicodemus for his hard-heartedness and unwillingness to believe what Jesus was saying. This is another gracious reminder that Nicodemus needed a supernatural new birth, because he was unable on his own to attain these things. But it was also a gracious invitation for Nicodemus to put aside his pride and receive that new birth.

(1) Condition: If you can't believe on the human level (12a-b)

(a) Condition: If I said the earthly things to you (12a)

This refers to the wind illustration taken from the natural world, which Jesus had just used to teach about the new birth. Jesus used a fairly straight forward analogy that should have been understood by Nicodemus.

On a deeper level, this is one example of a contrast theme that runs through John's Gospel – that is the contrast between earth and heaven, between the things above and the things below. Jesus will develop this theme even more in v. 13.

(b) Response: And you are not believing (12b)

Notice in this proposition that Jesus did not challenge Nicodemus because he did not UNDERSTAND the earthly illustration. Rather it says that he did not BELIEVE it. Jesus was pointing out that Nicodemus's lack of knowledge or intellectual ability was not the central issue. His hard heart and pride were the real issues that kept him from believing Jesus. In the Bible, intellectual ability is rarely (if ever) an issue or hindrance for knowing the truth. Much more often knowing and believing truth is a moral and volitional issue. And so, this is yet another area that shows the need for a new birth.

(2) Effect: How can you [you can't] believe on the heavenly level? (12c-d)

This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. In essence, "If you can't do this easy thing, you won't be able to do this harder thing."

(a) Condition: If I say the heavenly things to you (12c)

This is a continuation of the contrast between the earthly and heavenly. The "earthly" is the habitation common and accessible to all humanity. The "heavenly" is the habitation of God only accessible to Him and those to whom He reveals it. Without revelation, we humans cannot know or understand heavenly things.

Jesus was making a contrast: that the heavenly things, which He could speak about, were impossible for Nicodemus to know, especially in light of his inability and unwillingness to know the earthly things which Jesus had just spoken. But Jesus was also clearly claiming to be able to reveal heavenly things, and implicitly promising that He was doing so, and would continue to do so. This is another theme throughout this Gospel, that Jesus is sent from God to reveal God to humanity.

(b) Effect: How will you believe? (12d)

This is a rhetorical question. It is a statement in the form of a question. Jesus was challenging Nicodemus that he was not able to believe the heavenly things revealed because he had shown his unwillingness to believe the earthly things. Again, Nicodemus was being graciously humbled in order that he would see his need and humbly accept the authority of the One speaking to him. As long as Nicodemus held on to his confidence in his own position, attainment and authority, he was unable to come to the truth and true faith. And Jesus loved him enough not to allow him to remain in this position, without prodding him to change and inviting him to experience the new birth.

b Jesus corrected Nicodemus's lack of understanding (13-15)

Jesus did not just criticize Nicodemus's lack of understanding, but in these verses, He corrected it by giving the true understanding. He only tore down Nicodemus's pride and false assurance in order to rebuilt his life on a solid foundation. Sometimes it is necessary to tear down falsehood and idolatry, no matter how painful the process may be, in order to build a true relationship with God. A necessary part of learning the truth is to reject falsehood. But rejecting falsehood is incomplete unless it is replaced with the truth.

And the truth He brought focuses on Jesus as the One who provides new birth by His atoning sacrifice. No one can find new birth and eternal life on their own. We need to receive it from the One who brought it from Heaven, because He came down from Heaven for this purpose.

1) Only the One from Heaven has access to Heaven (13)

In this verse, Jesus claimed to be able to bring heavenly life to humanity, because He had come down from Heaven. And He is the only One Who can. This continues the theme contrasting Heaven and earth – from above and from below – which we saw in the previous verse.

a) And no one has gone up into Heaven (13a)

Jesus was not saying that no one has ever gone into heaven in the sense that we talk about “going to Heaven” when you die. In the Old Testament, Elijah ascended into Heaven. But Jesus meant this in the sense used in Deuteronomy 30:12 of having the qualification and ability to ascend to Heaven to interact with God and bring His blessings down to earth. This is the same stress on human inability that we have seen throughout this passage. Neither Nicodemus, nor any human is able to bring about the new birth or eternal life. This is the necessary negation in order to set up for the positive statement of the next proposition.

b) Except the One coming down from Heaven – the Son of Man (13b)

The answer to human inability is God's ability, and the truth of what God has actually done in Christ. What we cannot do, He has done. Jesus has come down from Heaven, from God, as stressed in the Prologue of John's Gospel, and throughout this book.

Jesus is described in two ways in this proposition: First, He is the One Who came down from Heaven. This is obviously a contrast with the human inability to go up to Heaven in the previous proposition. And it is a continuation of the teaching that Jesus was sent from God, because He is God. And the implication for this passage is that Jesus brought the supernatural life of the new birth from Heaven. He is the agent of bringing the life of Heaven to earth. Second, Jesus described Himself as the “Son of Man.” This is the way Jesus referred to Himself most often in the Gospels. And this phrase has two main connotations. The first is to stress that He is human, even the typical man. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). Jesus is fully human, and so shares in every aspect of human life (except sin). Jesus came down from Heaven by truly becoming human on our behalf.

The second significance of the phrase “Son of Man” is a reference to the individual described as “one like a son of man” in Daniel chapter 7. This One was a supernatural individual Who was given all authority and sovereign power over all humanity. The New Testament clearly says that this is fulfilled by Jesus. He combines these two aspects of the Son of Man. He is fully human, but He is also a supernatural being (God Himself) Who has all authority over humanity. This is the One Who has come down from Heaven to bring the new birth and the resulting eternal life to humanity.

2) **The Son of Man will save by fulfilling the type of the bronze serpent (14-15)**

In these verses, Jesus becomes more explicit in finally answering Nicodemus's question of "How will these things be?" Here He only began to hint at what will be more fully explained later in the New Testament. But He pointed to His sacrificial, substitutionary death, and the reception of its benefits by faith. He did this by pointing to yet another Old Testament passage which He expected Nicodemus to know and understand.

a) **The Son of Man will be lifted up like the bronze serpent (14)**

(1) **And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (14a)**

This refers to the events recorded in Numbers chapter 21. While travelling in the desert, God's people grumbled against God. And as punishment, they were being bitten by venomous snakes. When they cried out to Moses, admitting their sin and asking for relief from the snakes, God instructed Moses to make a replica of a snake and put it on a pole, so that everyone could see it (high above the crowd). Moses made a snake statue out of bronze and put it on a pole. And whoever looked at the bronze replica after being bitten by a poisonous snake was healed.

(2) **In the same way, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up (14b)**

This proposition starts with the phrase "in the same way," linking the bronze snake story in close parallel to what Jesus will do. And then is the phrase "it is necessary." What Jesus was discussing is central to His mission and purpose, and is indispensable for His being able to bring eternal life through the new birth. And the necessity is that the Son of Man – Jesus, will be lifted up.

The term "lifted up" is a fairly generic term for raising something in height. Jesus did not explain it any more than that in this verse, except to connect it to the way the bronze snake was lifted up. As is typical in John's Gospel, a key idea is introduced and hints at what will later be developed in much more detail. Based on the connection with the bronze serpent, and on what will become clear later in John's Gospel (see 12:32-33), we know that Jesus was referring to the cross. But even with the limited information given so far in the story, Jesus gave a clear picture of what He would do, and Nicodemus should have understood the implications.

And here, as with John's use of the term "lifted up" throughout the Gospel, there is a double meaning. The idea of being lifted up physically is combined with the idea of being lifted up in reputation and status, i.e. being exalted. And this word is sometimes translated "exalted." For John, Jesus being lifted up on the cross was also His exaltation, as the two events are obviously connected.

We can make the following connections between the bronze snake and the cross of Christ: First, the thing that was lifted up was a representation of what was killing the people. Moses made a replica of the snake that was poisoning them. When the Israelites looked at the snake statue, they were looking at a representation of their punishment and implicitly acknowledging their sin. And on the cross, Jesus was made the sin that is killing us (see 2 Cor. 5:21), and took on the representative punishment for our sin. And He was lifted up off the ground as a spectacle for all people to see, and to which we could look. When we look at the cross, we see the punishment that should have been ours, and we should honestly acknowledge our sin that put Him there. And those who look to His sacrifice on the cross with faith and repentance will find healing from our sin which is killing us, just as the ancient Israelites found relief from the snake venom by looking at the bronze snake. No one thought that looking at a bronze statue was in any way a natural/medical cure for venomous snakebite. It was obviously a gracious supernatural gift from God that healing would happen in this way. And in the same way, as Jesus had been stressing, the new birth

does not come in a natural/medical way like our first birth, or even by any human activity. It is a gracious supernatural gift from God, Who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Nicodemus was being challenged to look at Jesus for his salvation in the same way that the ancients were to look to the bronze snake. And all of this is confirmed in the next proposition.

b) So that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him (15)

The purpose of Jesus being lifted up on the cross is so that all who believe will have eternal life in Him. Believing in Jesus is a key theme in John's Gospel. And the reason this book was written was so that people would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and thereby have life in Him (20:31). Earlier in this passage, Jesus had made it abundantly clear that we cannot attain salvation for ourselves. Here, He clarified that we receive this salvation by believing – by trusting in Him and what He has done to bring us salvation.

Literally, this verse says “everyone believing.” And the translation “whoever believes” is a good translation, but has the risk of being misunderstood in ways described in the comments on v. 16.

The one who believes will have eternal life. This is the first occurrence of the phrase “eternal life” in John's Gospel. But this is a major theme which will occur throughout the rest of the book. As typical, John introduced an idea that he will only later define and elaborate (see especially 17:3). In the next verse, he will contrast it with perishing and condemnation. And in the context of all that has gone before, it is clearly connected with the new birth and experiencing the Kingdom of God. It is not just life that goes on forever. It is a quality of life that is fitting for the age to come when we will experience God's immediate presence and all of His blessings. Jesus later referred to it as “abundant life” or “life to the full” (10:10) And in this verse, Jesus stressed that this eternal life is “in Him.” “In Him” describes the eternal life, not the act of believing. In v. 16, John makes it clear that we believe in Him (using a slightly different phrase). But in this verse, the emphasis is that the life is in Jesus. He is the source of eternal life. And the experience of this life is the experience of Jesus Himself (again, see 17:3). This is the final answer to Nicodemus's question “How can this happen?” It all happens because of Him, and it all happens in Him.

All of these things are not yet fully explained, but they will be throughout the rest of this Gospel, starting in verses 16-21.

Summary:

All humans, including Nicodemus, have the need for a new birth in order to experience the Kingdom of God. This new birth is supernatural – it only comes from God, and by His power and activity. And this new birth comes only from God's Messiah, sent from Heaven. This new birth happens only by Him taking our sin on the cross, and thereby procuring the needed cleansing and blessing of God's Spirit. And we experience the new birth only by believing in Christ, Who is the source and agent of this new life. And the new birth brings eternal life, which is equated with experiencing God's Kingdom.