SMITH FOR CHRIST PUBLISHING · BEREAN DASHBOARD STUDY

John 3

You Must Be Born Again — O·I·A, integrated with the Deep Dive

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION · 2026-11-10 · NASB 1995

"Seeking God diligently — examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." — Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

No man gets into God's kingdom on his first birth; he must be born from above by the Spirit, and that new life comes by looking to the Son lifted up on the cross. Once a man has seen Him, the right response is John's: He must increase, and I must decrease.

00 The Text

JOHN 3 (NASB95), MARKED

HOW THIS STUDY IS MARKED — God — His character & actions · Command / instruction · Key repeated word · Sin / warning · Promise / blessing · Time / place / contrast

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;

2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?

11 "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.

12 "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

13 "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.

14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

17 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

18 “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

19 “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.

20 “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

21 “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.

23 John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized—

24 for John had not yet been thrown into prison.

25 Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification.

26 And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.”

27 John answered and said,
“A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.

28 “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’

29 “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.

30 “He must increase, but I must decrease.

31 “He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.

32 “What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony.

33 “He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true.

34 “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.

35 “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.

36 “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Marked in the text

- **v2** “came to Jesus by night” — Time / place / contrast
- **v3** “unless one is born again” — Command / instruction
- **v5** “born of water and the Spirit” — God — His character & actions
- **v6** “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” — Time / place / contrast
- **v7** “You must be born again” — Command / instruction
- **v8** “The wind blows where it wishes” — God — His character & actions
- **v10** “the teacher of Israel” — Sin / warning
- **v13** “He who descended from heaven” — God — His character & actions
- **v14** “even so must the Son of Man be lifted up” — God — His character & actions
- **v16** “God so loved the world” — God — His character & actions
- **v16** “He gave His only begotten Son” — God — His character & actions
- **v16** “shall not perish, but have eternal life” — Promise / blessing
- **v17** “that the world might be saved through Him” — Promise / blessing
- **v18** “has been judged already” — Sin / warning
- **v19** “men loved the darkness rather than the Light” — Sin / warning
- **v21** “he who practices the truth comes to the Light” — Command / instruction
- **v23** “Aenon near Salim” — Time / place / contrast
- **v27** “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven” — God — His character & actions
- **v29** “the friend of the bridegroom” — Promise / blessing

- **v30** “He must increase, but I must decrease” — Command / instruction
- **v34** “He gives the Spirit without measure” — God — His character & actions
- **v35** “The Father loves the Son” — God — His character & actions
- **v36** “He who believes in the Son has eternal life” — Promise / blessing
- **v36** “the wrath of God abides on him” — Sin / warning
- **v3** “born” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v12** “believe” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v15** “believes” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v18** “believed” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v19** “Light” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v11** “testimony” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v32** “testifies” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · JOHN 3:3

"Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.""

Setting. Jerusalem at Passover (2:13, 23), right after Jesus cleansed the temple and "knew what was in man" (2:25). Nicodemus — a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, "the teacher of Israel" — comes at night (vv1–2). Then the scene moves to the Judean countryside, where Jesus' disciples are baptizing, and to Aenon near Salim, where John the Baptist is still baptizing before his arrest (vv22–24).

Structure:

- vv1–8 — **born from above:** Nicodemus's compliment (v2); "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v3); "How can a man be born when he is old?" (v4); born of water and the Spirit (v5); flesh gives birth to flesh, Spirit to spirit (v6); "You must be born again" (v7); the wind (v8).
- vv9–15 — **the Son of Man lifted up:** "How can these things be?" (v9); the teacher of Israel does not understand (v10); earthly things and heavenly things (vv11–12); the only One who descended from heaven (v13); Moses' serpent and the Son lifted up, so that whoever believes has eternal life (vv14–15).
- vv16–21 — **love and light:** God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (v16); sent to save, not to judge (v17); believer not judged, unbeliever judged already (v18); men loved the darkness (vv19–20); the one who practices the truth comes to the Light (v21).
- vv22–30 — **the friend of the bridegroom:** Jesus and John both baptizing (vv22–24); a dispute about purification; "all are coming to Him" (vv25–26); a man receives nothing unless given from heaven (v27); "I am not the Christ" (v28); the bridegroom and his friend, joy made full (v29); "He must increase, but I must decrease" (v30).
- vv31–36 — **the One from above:** He is above all (v31); He testifies to what He has seen, and few receive it (vv32–33); He speaks God's words and has the Spirit without measure (v34); the Father has given all things into His hand (v35); life or wrath (v36).

Repeated words, with counts:

- "born" ×8 — vv3, 4 (×2), 5, 6 (×2), 7, 8 (all in vv3–8).
- "believe / believes / believed" ×8 — vv12 (×2), 15, 16, 18 (×3), 36.
- "Son" ×8 — vv13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 35, 36 (×2); "Son of Man" ×2 — vv13, 14.
- "God" ×12 — vv2 (×2), 3, 5, 16, 17, 18, 21, 33, 34 (×2), 36.
- "testify / testimony / witnesses" ×7 — vv11 (×2), 26, 28, 32 (×2), 33.
- "world" ×5 — vv16, 17 (×3), 19.
- "Light" ×5 — vv19 (×2), 20 (×2), 21; "darkness" ×1 — v19.
- "heaven / heavenly" ×5 — vv12, 13 (×2), 27, 31; "above" ×3 — v31; "earth / earthly" ×4 — vv12, 31 (×3).
- "Spirit" ×4 — vv5, 6, 8, 34 (+ "spirit" v6).
- "judge / judged / judgment" ×4 — vv17, 18 (×2), 19.

- “baptizing / baptized” ×4 — vv22, 23 (×2), 26.
- “must” ×4 — vv7, 14, 30 (×2).
- “eternal life” ×3 — vv15, 16, 36 (“life” ×4 with v36’s “will not see life”).
- “Truly, truly” ×3 — vv3, 5, 11; “kingdom of God” ×2 — vv3, 5.
- “love(s) / loved” ×3 — vv16, 19, 35; “deeds” ×3 — vv19, 20, 21.

Contrasts: night (v2) ⟷ Light (vv19–21). Born of the flesh ⟷ born of the Spirit (v6). Earthly things ⟷ heavenly things (v12). Ascended ⟷ descended (v13). Perish ⟷ eternal life (v16). Saved ⟷ judged (vv17–18). Darkness ⟷ Light; does evil ⟷ practices the truth (vv19–21). Bridegroom ⟷ friend of the bridegroom (v29). Increase ⟷ decrease (v30). From above ⟷ of the earth (v31). Believes ⟷ does not obey; life ⟷ wrath (v36).

Shape of the chapter: a conversation (1–21) and a testimony (22–36). It moves from a man who must be born from above to the Son who came from above, and from a teacher in the dark to a friend who rejoices in the Light.

Chapter theme (my words): The kingdom of God is entered only by a new birth from above, worked by the Spirit and received by looking in faith to the Son lifted up. The one who believes has life now; the one who refuses remains under wrath; and the one who has seen Him gladly gets smaller.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · JOHN 3:14

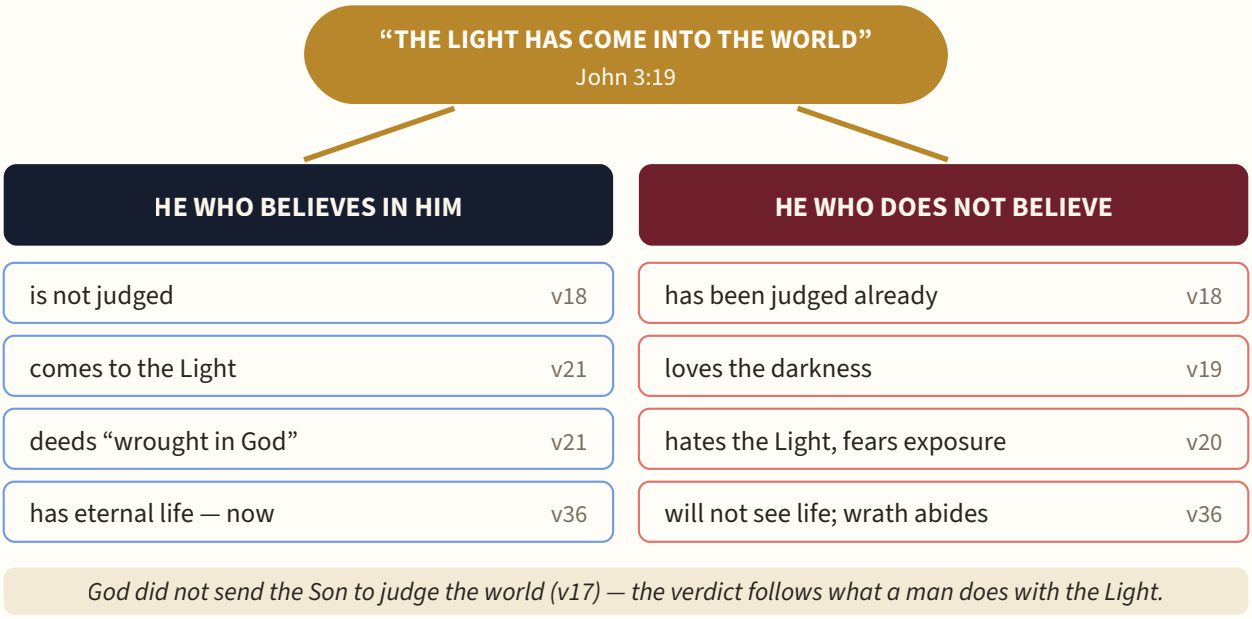
"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, △ even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;"

FIGURE · THE BRONZE SERPENT AND THE SON OF MAN

JOHN 3:14–15	NUMBERS 21:4–9	THE SON OF MAN
THE DANGER	bitten by fiery serpents; many died (Num 21:6)	perishing in sin; "shall not perish" (v16)
THE REMEDY	a bronze serpent, made at God's command (21:8)	the Son of Man, given by God (v16)
LIFTED UP	set on a standard where all could see (21:9)	lifted up on a cross (v14; 12:32–33)
THE RESPONSE	look at it (21:8)	believe in Him (v15)
THE RESULT	"he lived" (21:9)	"eternal life" (v15)

Read across each row: Jesus takes Numbers 21 point by point — the danger, the remedy God provided, the lifting up, the look of faith, and life.

FIGURE · TWO RESPONSES TO THE LIGHT



The Light comes to save, not to judge; the two columns show where a man stands, now and finally, by what he does with the Son.

What does "born again" mean? *Anōthen* means both "again" and "from above" (Guzik, Henry). Nicodemus hears only the first and pictures a second physical birth (v4). Jesus means a birth God gives — "born of the Spirit" (vv5–8). Sproul: "There is no such thing as a non-born-again Christian or an unregenerate Christian." "Born-again Christian" is a redundant phrase.

What is the "water" in verse 5? Honest teachers differ. Guzik lists five readings — baptism, physical birth, the Word (Eph 5:26), the Spirit as living water (7:38–39), and the cleansing water of Ezekiel 36:25–27 — and gives Ezekiel "the most weight (though it is a tough call)." Sproul admits he does not know for sure, reads it through Ezekiel 36–37, and thinks a baptism reading less likely. Henry: "of the Spirit working like water." Spurgeon flatly rejects baptismal regeneration. Ezekiel's promise of clean water *and* a new spirit, given to Israel, is what a "teacher of Israel" should have known (v10).

Which comes first, new birth or faith? Sproul, Spurgeon and Henry read the chapter in the Reformed way: the Spirit must give life before a dead man can believe (Sproul: Lazarus cannot bring himself out of the tomb). Others read verses 14–16 as faith receiving the new life. Both agree on what matters most for my men: you cannot birth yourself (Guzik), and whoever looks to Christ lives (Spurgeon).

Why the bronze serpent? Israel was dying of a judgment they deserved (Num 21:4–9). God's remedy looked like the very thing that was killing them, lifted on a pole, and all they had to do was look. Guzik: "a bronze serpent does speak of sin, but of sin judged." Sproul: "the substitute serpent." "Lifted up" in John always means the cross first (12:32–33), then the glory.

Who is speaking in verse 16? The original Greek has no quotation marks. NASB prints Jesus speaking through v21; Sproul notes that "Usually, commentators see John 3:16 as an editorial comment made by John." Either way it is the Word of God, and the point is the same.

What does "the world" mean in verse 16? Guzik notes that many Jews assumed God loved Israel alone, so "the world" was revolutionary. Sproul warns against reading it as universalism: God loves the world by giving one Son, and refusing Him leaves a man judged already (v18). Spurgeon: "while every unbeliever is excluded, every believer is included."

Why do men stay in the dark? Not lack of evidence but love of darkness (v19). Guzik: "there is a moral compromise at the root of their rejection." Henry: "Christ is hated because sin is loved." The Light exposes (*elenchō*), and that is what we fear.

Who speaks verses 31–36? NASB keeps John the Baptist speaking through v36; Guzik notes others read it as the evangelist's comment. The teaching does not change: the Son is from above, has the Spirit without measure, and holds all things in His hand.

Word study (Greek):

- **again / from above — *anōthen* (G509):** both senses; John 3:3, 7, 31; 19:11, 23.
- **wind / Spirit — *pneuma* (G4151):** the same word in v8; wind, breath, Spirit.
- **must — *dei* (G1163):** divine necessity; 3:7, 14, 30; 4:4, 24.
- **lift up — *hypsoō* (G5312):** in John always the Son of Man — 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34; it means the cross (12:33).
- **only begotten — *monogenēs* (G3439):** one of a kind; John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Heb 11:17 (Isaac); 1 John 4:9.
- **exposed — *elenchō* (G1651):** brought to light and convicted; 3:20; 8:46; 16:8.
- **bridegroom — *nymphios* (G3566):** John 2:9; 3:29 (×3); the LORD as Israel's bridegroom (Isa 62:5).
- **wrath — *orgē* (G3709):** settled opposition to sin; only here in John's Gospel.
- **does not obey — *apeitheō* (G544):** refuses to be persuaded; only here in John.

Key insights to carry (from the Deep Dive):

1. **The chapter begins after a warning** — Jesus did not entrust Himself to sign-impressed believers (2:23–25).
2. **"Again" and "from above" are one word** — *anōthen*.
3. **You cannot birth yourself** (Guzik); Lazarus cannot raise himself (Sproul).
4. **The water is probably Ezekiel's water** — none of the four makes it baptismal regeneration.
5. **Saved by a look** — Christ "hung on the cross on purpose to be looked at" (Spurgeon).
6. **The cross is a divine "must"** — the same *dei* in vv7, 14, 30.
7. **Love came before we turned** (Guzik).
8. **Men run from the Light because it exposes** (Sproul, Henry).
9. **Joy in decreasing** — John was happy to lose his congregation to Jesus (Guzik).
10. **Wrath abides — and so does life** — both present tense in v36.

Cross-references: Gen 22:2; Num 21:4–9; Isa 45:22; 54:5; 62:5; Ezek 36:25–27; 37:1–14; Dan 7:13; Hos 2:19–20; John 1:12–13; 2:23–25; 5:24; 7:37–39, 50–51; 8:28; 12:32–33; 19:39; Rom 1:18–21; 5:8; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5; Heb 11:17; 1 Pet 1:23; 1 John 1:7; 4:9.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · JOHN 3:30

"△ He must increase, but I must decrease."

FIGURE · THE FOUR "MUSTS" OF JOHN 3

THE FOUR "MUSTS" OF JOHN 3 · ONE GREEK WORD, DEI

THE SINNER'S MUST John 3:7	THE SAVIOR'S MUST John 3:14	THE SOVEREIGN'S MUST John 3:30	THE SERVANT'S MUST John 3:30
"You must be born again." No one can see the kingdom without it	*"so must the Son of Man be lifted up"* The cross is not an accident	*"He must increase"* Christ's kingdom keeps growing	*"but I must decrease"* The friend steps aside — and rejoices

The same word returns in 4:4 — "He *had to* pass through Samaria" —

Guzik's four labels: the sinner's, the Savior's, the sovereign's and the servant's must.

One small Greek word, dei, carries the whole chapter: what the sinner must undergo, what the Savior must suffer, and what the servant must gladly become.

Command to obey — "You must be born again." This is not a suggestion to try harder. I have sat with men who have been "religious" since childhood, who know the songs and the verses, and who have never been born from above. Nicodemus had everything a man could have on the outside. If that wasn't enough for him, it isn't enough for me. The first question isn't "am I doing better?" but "have I been born of the Spirit?"

Promise to trust — "whoever believes will in Him have eternal life." The bitten Israelite didn't have to understand bronze or theology. He had to look. When a man tells me he is too far gone, I point him to the pole: the remedy was for people dying of the very thing they had done. "Whoever" has no fine print. And the life is present tense — "has eternal life" (v36) — not a reward I earn at the end.

Sin to confess — loving the darkness. Verse 20 is honest about me: I have kept things out of the Light because I didn't want them exposed. The phone, the money, the resentment, the drink. Jesus says that is not a lack of information; it is a love of darkness. I confess it, and I bring it into the Light, because the Light came to save, not to condemn (v17).

Example to follow — John the Baptist. "He must increase, but I must decrease." I want credit. I want the men to say I helped them. John lost his crowd and called it joy. This week I will do one thing for another man's good where I get no credit at all, and I will thank God when someone else gets the attention.

Questions for the table (from the Deep Dive):

1. Nicodemus had religion, position and reputation, and still had to be born again. What have I trusted in that cannot give me new birth? (3:1–7; Titus 3:5) *A man's first birth does not assure him of the kingdom (Guzik).*
2. Where have I seen the "wind" of the Spirit at work in a man I know — not the wind itself, but what it moved? (3:8; Ezek 37:9–10) *You hear its sound; you see its effects.*
3. The bitten Israelites only had to look. What am I still trying to do, instead of looking to Christ lifted up? (3:14–15; Num 21:8–9) *All you have to do is to look (Spurgeon).*
4. Is there a part of my life I keep out of the Light "for fear that [my] deeds will be exposed"? What would it take to bring it in? (3:19–21; 1 John 1:7) *The Light comes to save before it judges (v17).*
5. Where am I competing for credit or attention in ministry, at home or at work? What would "I must decrease" look like this week? (3:27–30) *The friend of the bridegroom rejoices at the Groom's voice.*
6. Verse 36 says the believer has eternal life now. How would I live differently today if I believed that is already true of me? (3:36; 5:24) *Present tense: has life; present tense: wrath abides.*

Worship. God so loved the world — not a world that was looking for Him, but a world loving darkness — that He gave His only begotten Son. The Son came down from heaven, was lifted up on a cross like the serpent on the pole, and now holds all things in His hand. The Spirit blows where He wishes, and He blew on me.

Prayer. Father, thank You for loving me before I ever turned to You, and for giving Your only Son. Lord Jesus, I look to You lifted up for me; I cannot birth myself. Holy Spirit, blow where You wish — through me, and through the men I serve. Drag my hidden deeds into the Light, and let them be wrought in God. Make me glad to decrease, so that You increase in my home, my group and my heart. Amen.

Scripture: New American Standard Bible® (NASB), © 1960–1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. · Teacher material summarized from David Guzik (Enduring Word), R.C. Sproul (Ligonier), C.H. Spurgeon and Matthew Henry — see John-3-Deep-Dive-Four-Voices.pdf for sources. · Importable: the companion .md carries the berean-study block.