

A summary of John 3:1-13

1. The account of Nicodemus in John chapter 3 follows sequentially chapters 1 and 2, and there seems to be an order according to our experience. In chapter 1, the Word was with God and was God and became flesh, to dwell with us (1:1-2, 14). Eventually, Jesus began to attract His disciples, first through John the Baptist, as the Lamb of God, then through the disciples of John the Baptist. Andrew brought Peter his brother, Jesus found Philip and Philip found Nathanael. Then in chapter 2, with the wedding at Cana, we see a picture of Christ and the church. When we are attracted to follow the Lord, we realize that we need the divine life to match the Christ whom we follow. Our death needs to be changed to life, typified by the changing of water into wine. At the same time, we also realize that as we become the temple of God and begin to live in the church life, we need to be purified so we can become the dwelling place of God in spirit (Ephesians 2:22). However, chapter 3 takes us higher. We may be attracted by miracles and signs and even recognize that God is present (3:2). However, we need to realize that to follow the Lord, we need to pass through death and resurrection (termination of our old creation and germination of the new creation), typified by the water and the Spirit. Who we are needs to change, not because of a miracle (e.g. a good job, good grades, or a happy and sweet church life), but because of a new birth. John chapter 3 marks perhaps the first turning point, and acts as a bridge for the subsequent revelations of who Jesus Christ is.
2. John 3:5 is a continuation of John 1:33. John the Baptist baptized people with water, but said that He who was coming, and on whom the Spirit would descend, would baptize in the Holy Spirit. Water symbolizes death, the termination of our old creation. The Spirit signifies the germination of the divine life.
3. Jesus reinforced this truth by repeating to Nicodemus that he needed to be born from above (John 3:7). The first time, in 3:3, Jesus said he needed to be born again. Nicodemus did not understand "again," thinking that Jesus was referring to a second physical birth. The second time, in 3:7, Jesus said "born from above" (according to certain versions). "Above" refers to something heavenly, to be differentiated from "again." This is the principle of regeneration which originates and is executed from above, not from ourselves or from our self-efforts, as Nicodemus was, and we are, apt to believe.
4. In 2:11 and 2:23, many believed in Jesus because of the sign. However, in 2:23-25, Jesus did not commit or entrust Himself to them because He knew what was in their heart. Many knew about Jesus and had heard about Him. Nicodemus also knew that Jesus had come from God. But he needed to know that Jesus Himself was God. He needed a different nature that could only be given him by God Himself.
5. To enter into God's kingdom, which is the heavenly realm, we need a new birth. The kingdom is another realm, actually Jesus Christ Himself in us (Luke 17:21). How does the kingdom become real in our life? Through a spiritual birth, not a physical birth. The Lord does not force us to change. We need to come to Him through our prayers. An inward change will lead to a living that bears a certain testimony. We need to ask ourselves two questions: 1. Am I living in God's kingdom? 2. Have I surrendered myself to Him?
6. How do we have the assurance that the Spirit is in us? Experientially speaking, we must accept the word of the Lord, and have many prayers to the Lord, asking Him to cleanse us and bring us out of the flesh into the Spirit. Practically, this means that when the Lord speaks to us and we listen, we need to obey Him, to take one more step. Otherwise, we will fall back into living in our flesh (a routine life, without the Lord's fresh leading and speaking).
7. Nicodemus came to Jesus. Do we come? He was humble and honest. He admitted that he did not understand what Jesus was telling him. Jesus responded to him. Nicodemus responded back, and this dialogue led to much more revelation in chapter 3. This shows that we need to come to the Lord wherever we are, honestly and truthfully, and not pretend to know that we understand. Then the Lord may speak to us a little bit more. If we are self-satisfied or content with our Bible knowledge, the Lord will not speak to us anymore.
8. However, a humble heart is not enough. Even if we have a hungry heart, we may not have revelation. We need to abide in the church life, and to listen to the servants of the Lord, in order that we may receive some of the revelation that they have received (1 John 1:1-3). We need to also be very careful to give a testimony of how the Lord helped us or blessed us. The Greek word for both "testify" and "witness" is *martureo* which denotes martyrdom. These words are very high. Jesus as the Son (and possibly the Father and the Spirit) in 3:11 testified and witnessed what "We" (possibly referring to the Triune God) or They had seen (cf. 1 John 1:1) with revelation. Those of us who are older in the church life need to be very careful how we speak. It is very hard to receive revelation without being willing to be "martyred" or to live a crucified life.
9. Be very careful to say "I understand" (3:13). None of us has ascended up to heaven, in other words none of us can understand heavenly things. Even Enoch and Elijah, the only two in the Bible who were raptured, are not counted. Jesus is uniquely qualified because He went through the process of incarnation (descending from heaven), death and resurrection, thus being qualified to ascend. Heavenly things can only be understood if we are willing to live a life of death and resurrection.