

1) Where John 3 Sits in John's Story

A. The "new birth" conversation is not random

John 3 comes right after **John 2** (wedding at Cana; temple cleansing; Jesus' "signs"). John has just told us:

- Many "believed" because of the signs...
- ...but Jesus "did not entrust himself to them," because he knew what was in people (John 2:23-25).

That sets up Nicodemus perfectly: he comes with **sign-based confidence** ("we know you're from God because of the signs"), and Jesus immediately pushes him beyond signs to **new creation** life.

B. Nicodemus is "a representative" character

John often uses individuals as "case studies" of what it means to encounter Jesus. Nicodemus is not merely a person; he's also **an emblem of a kind of faith**: sincere, learned, intrigued... but still needing transformation.

2) Key Greek Terms That Shape the Meaning

A. "Born *anōthen*" (ἀνωθεν) "again" and "from above"

In John 3:3 and 3:7, Jesus says someone must be born **anōthen**.

- **anōthen** can mean *again* or *from above*.
- Nicodemus hears it as "again" (hence the literal womb question).
- But John uses *anōthen* elsewhere in ways that clearly mean "**from above**." D. A. Carson notes John may intend the **double meaning**, but insists it "does not mean less than 'from above.'"

Preaching idea: "Born again" isn't merely "a second start." It's a start whose **origin** is heaven, God's initiative.

B. "See" the kingdom vs "Enter" the kingdom (3:3 vs 3:5)

John uses two verbs:

- "cannot **see** the kingdom of God" (3:3)
- "cannot **enter** the kingdom of God" (3:5)

These are likely **parallel** rather than sequential steps. The point is not two different experiences, but one reality: without God's Spirit-given birth, you don't even perceive what God is doing, much less participate in it.

C. "Kingdom of God" in John is rare (and that's significant)

John doesn't use "kingdom of God" often compared to the Synoptics. When it appears here, it's like a bright flare: this conversation is about **God's reign arriving through Jesus** and the necessary transformation to participate in it.

3) "Born of Water and Spirit" (John 3:5): What's Going On?

This is one of the most debated phrases in the passage.

A. Carson's contextual argument: one birth, OT-shaped imagery

Carson argues that "born again/from above" (3:3) and "born of water and Spirit" (3:5) are **parallel**, so Jesus is not describing *two births* (physical + spiritual), but one new birth characterized by "water/Spirit" imagery.

He also points out that Jesus rebukes Nicodemus as "the teacher of Israel" for not understanding (3:10), implying the conceptual background should be **Old Testament**, not later Christian ritual debates.

B. The strongest OT intertext: Ezekiel 36 (and the new covenant hope)

In Ezekiel 36:25-27, God promises:

- cleansing water: "I will sprinkle clean water on you..."
- new heart/new spirit: "I will give you a new heart... put my Spirit within you..."

Carson explicitly connects John 3:5 to this OT "water + Spirit" pairing as **cleansing + empowerment**, a new origin that makes a new life possible.

Intertextual point: Jesus is telling Nicodemus that Israel's long-promised renewal is arriving, and it's arriving through Jesus.

C. So is baptism in view?

Interpretations differ across traditions, but here's a few thoughts:

- The imagery is deeply OT (new covenant cleansing/Spirit).

- But John's Gospel is also written from a post-resurrection horizon where baptism is part of Christian identity.
- A balanced reading many adopt: Jesus' primary referent is OT renewal, and early Christian readers naturally see baptism as the **signpost** of that Spirit-given cleansing and new birth (without reducing new birth to the ritual itself).

4) The “Wind/Spirit” Saying (John 3:8) and Johannine Theology

“The wind blows where it wishes...”

Greek again matters:

- The same word family (*pneuma*) can carry “wind/breath/Spirit.”
- Jesus is underscoring **divine freedom** and **divine initiative**.

This strengthens your sermon's “control vs life” theme: the Spirit is not an object to manage. The Spirit is the agent who births.

Discipleship implication: If someone confuses maturity with control, John 3:8 is a direct challenge.

5) The “Heavenly Things” and the Son of Man (John 3:11-13)

Jesus contrasts:

- “earthly things” (the birth metaphor, wind metaphor)
- “heavenly things” (what this new birth ultimately *means* about Jesus and God's saving plan)

Then he introduces:

- descent/ascent language (3:13)
- “Son of Man” (3:13-14)

Even if we don't fully decode every element, the narrative force is clear: Jesus speaks not as a mere teacher but as the one with **heavenly authority** and **heavenly origin**.

6) “Lifted Up” (John 3:14-15): Cross as Exaltation

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent... so must the Son of Man be lifted up...”

Two key layers:

A. Explicit intertext: Numbers 21

John evokes the bronze serpent story (Num 21). Richard Hays notes John often alludes not through long quotations but by **evoking images**, and John 3:14 is a classic example of “more visual than auditory.”

B. Johannine double-meaning: “lifted up” = crucifixion *and* exaltation

In John, “lifted up” (*hypsōthēnai*) functions with a deliberate irony: the cross is shame in one register, but glory in another.

This is how John prepares readers to see the crucifixion not as defeat but as the paradoxical enthronement of Jesus.

Series connection: The road to life runs straight through the cross.

7) John 3:16-17: Love, Gift, and the Shape of Salvation

A. “Loved the world”

In John, “world” (*kosmos*) often means the realm of human life in rebellion and darkness—yet it is the object of God’s love.

This is the evangelical heartbeat of the passage, but it is also a profoundly **anti-tribal** line: God’s love moves outward.

B. “Gave his one and only Son”

The key term is *monogenēs* (“one-of-a-kind,” “unique”). The stress is not merely on “only child” sentimentality, but on the uniqueness of the Son’s identity and mission.

C. Salvation framed as “life”

John’s Gospel consistently frames salvation as **life** (*zōē*), not merely a legal status, but participation in the life God gives through the Son.

This is naturally connected to Michael Gorman’s participationist emphasis: salvation is not only something we “get,” but a life we are drawn into, transformation that becomes witness. Gorman captures the Pauline side of this when he argues the goal isn’t merely to believe the gospel but to “become the gospel,” participating in God’s life and mission.

8) N. T. Wright’s Pastoral Angle: Don’t Obsess the Birth, Live the Life

Wright has a helpful pastoral instinct here: he warns against making “born again” only a label or a story we keep retelling, rather than a lived reality. In a comment on John 3, he writes (in essence) that what matters is being alive now and showing signs of health and purpose.

Sermon idea:

- not “manage the experience,”
- but “receive the life,”
- and let it show up as Spirit-shaped vitality.

9) Romans 4 as a Second Witness: Faith as Reception, Not Wages

Romans 4 reinforces John 3’s logic:

- New birth is **received**.
- Righteousness is **credited** (*logizomai*), an accounting term for reckoning something to someone’s account.

Paul’s contrast (wages vs gift) matches your “control vs receiving” theme:

- If it’s wages, you can control the outcome by performance.
- If it’s gift, you receive and respond with trust.

Also note the resonance with John:

- John 3 stresses believing/trusting the Son for life.
- Romans 4 stresses trusting God’s promise for righteousness.

Different angles, same gospel grammar: **grace initiates; faith receives; life follows.**

Reflection and Application for Deeper Study

1) Diagnose “Spiritual Control”

- Where do you treat faith like a system to master rather than a life to receive?
- What do you do with mystery: do you worship, or do you tighten your grip?

2) Hear Ezekiel 36 Behind John 3

Read Ezekiel 36:25-27 slowly.

- What does God *do*?
- What does Israel *receive*?
- How does that reshape your expectations of “growth”?

3) Look at the Bronze Serpent Intertext (Num 21)

- Why does Jesus choose that story?
- What parallels exist between “looking” in Numbers 21 and “believing” in John 3?

4) Turn Life into Witness

If the Spirit’s work is like wind:

- What “movement” in your life would count as evidence of the Spirit’s direction?
- Who around you might “feel the wind” through your humility, courage, repentance, or kindness?