

Title: Lifted Up**[Slide 1]****Text: John 3:1-16****Night****Of birds and planes:**

How would you describe an *airplane* to someone who had never seen or heard of one? You could try to make some sort of comparison that they might understand as a starting point. A plane, for instance, is something like a *bird – a very big bird that you can ride in as it flies.*

But what would that sound like to the person you were talking to? They would no doubt say, "A bird that eats people and carries them off? Sounds totally terrifying! I'd never go near one of those."

No matter how hard you might try, you would never be able to adequately help such a person to understand what a plane actually is and what it can do. It simply isn't on their grid. It isn't part of their world.

In order for them to know what a plane is, they would have to dare to leave their old world behind and get on board for a flight.

Nicodemus

This was the problem Jesus faced when a prominent religious and political figure named Nicodemus came to discuss theology with Him:

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John 3:1-2 NIV

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus was a member of a strict religious party within the Judaism of his time. He no doubt considered himself an authority when it came to

evaluating religious teachers. He was here as a religious expert, giving Jesus his approval.

Night:

Poor Nicodemus: he was like a pre-modern person who had never seen an airplane, but had stumbled onto an airfield. All around him are these strange winged machines and he has no idea what they are for.

John tells us that his visit to Jesus was *at night*. Darkness and night symbolize for John the realm of evil, untruth and ignorance. In his introduction to the Gospel John says:

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John 1:5 NIV

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The word translated "overcome" can equally be translated "understood." This describes precisely Nicodemus' situation as he comes to Jesus that night. He is walking into the brilliant light of Heaven itself – shining forth from the Word made flesh. But because he lives in this dark world, he cannot *understand* what he sees or hears.

You and I face the same challenge. We live our lives in the shadows of this darkened world. It is as impossible for us to grasp or understand what it means to know Jesus or become a child of God as it was for Nicodemus.

Spirit Birth

A second birth:

To start Nicodemus on his journey to a whole new world, Jesus says:

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John 3:3 NIV

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that if he wants to see God's Kingdom come, something has to change. He is a person blinded by the darkness of this

world. No matter how desperately he longs for God's rule to come, he will not be able to see it in his present condition! He needs *new eyes*. *He needs a second birth*.

Here's where things start to get tricky. You see, the word Jesus uses to describe this second birth experience has two meanings. It can mean "again," or it can mean "from above." Nicodemus has to decide which meaning Jesus is talking about.

"Born again?"

Nicodemus replies:

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John 3:4 NIV

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Nicodemus takes Jesus to be saying "You must be born *all over again*." Taken that way, what Jesus is saying is absurd. No one can be physically *reborn*! What kind of teaching is this? Is He saying that it's impossible to see God's Kingdom at all?

As a Pharisee, he had devoted his life to fulfilling each and every one of God's commands in an effort to help bring the Kingdom of God to earth. So what's this new rabbi talking about when He says you have to be birthed all over again?

Spirit Birth:

The problem is that Nicodemus is thinking "*horizontally*," from the perspective of the only world he knows. Jesus, on the other hand, is speaking "*vertically*," from the perspective of Heaven. When Jesus speaks of seeing the Kingdom of God, He is talking about Heaven and Earth coming together at last – right inside us! He's not talking about people figuring out how God works and what God wants. He's not talking about refining a religious tradition. He is saying that we need to be radically changed – born *from above*.

So Jesus answers Nicodemus in a more detailed way:

[Slide 6]*John 3:5-8 NIV*

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Jesus explains that there are in fact not one, but *two* realms in play here: the realm of the "flesh" – this world that we know so well – and the realm of the "Spirit" – God's Kingdom come. This earthly, "fleshly" realm can never birth us into God's Spirit realm. For that to happen, God's Spirit must come to us and birth us *from above*.

[Slide 7]*John 3:7*

"You sound not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born from above.'"

And it's not something you will ever figure out or analyze from an earthly perspective! It's like the wind, that comes and goes unseen. You can hear it and feel it, but you can't see where it comes from or where it's going. That's how it is when it comes to being "born of the Spirit."

Lifted Up**Heaven's Witness:**

Nicodemus is totally confused: "How can this be?" he asks (John 3:9 NIV).

Jesus responds by pointing out the futility of even the most learned teacher trying to figure out God's doings from an earthly perspective. He needs new information – information that comes from Heaven. He needs to learn to think and see "vertically" instead of "horizontally."

Jesus challenges him to think "vertically" when He says:

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John 3:11-13 NIV

Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Nicodemus was willing to grant that Jesus was a teacher empowered by God, like the prophets of old, no doubt. But this is something of an entirely different order! Jesus is saying that He alone came down *from Heaven* – think “vertically” -- to bring God’s Rule and victory to this world. He is here on mission – the mission to rescue the entire world from the clutches of evil and death.

God had promised to repair and restore His Creation. Now, God the Son, the Word through whom all things were created, is here to bring that to reality! This is no human-inspired project. Nicodemus is in no place to pass judgment on its legitimacy. Jesus is talking about the Creator God entering His world to create once again by birthing people through His Spirit into His family.

The Serpent in the Desert:

And this rescue mission is not going to look like *anything* Nicodemus could have ever imagined. Rescue, for Nicodemus, meant that God came as King to judge the pagans and establish Israel as ruler of the nations. In other words, Rome and its armies would have to go.

But Jesus says that in order for God’s Kingdom rule to come, something exceedingly strange and unthinkable must happen:

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John 3:14-15 NIV

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

To help Nicodemus think “vertically,” Jesus references an old Hebrew story. When Israel was wandering through the desert on its way to the Promised

Land, poisonous snakes infested their camp. To heal them, God told Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and put it on a standard. Anyone who looked in faith upon that serpent would be healed. The thing that brought death had been transformed into a symbol of healing and life!

Now Jesus says that He will be "lifted up" like the bronze serpent in the desert. The phrase He uses has two meanings: (1) to exalt to a place of supreme honor, or (2) to be put to death on a cross. For Jesus, both meanings will be true. He will be lifted up on a cross, but that "lifting up" will be the supreme revelation of God's love and forgiveness. Anyone who looks to Him in faith will be granted eternal life:

[Slide 10]

John 3:16 NIV

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Just as God used a bronze serpent to heal Israel after she had rebelled against Him, now God's own precious Son will take the sin of the world upon Himself. All who look to Him in trust and faith will be born from above!

Lifted up:

How does a person who never saw an airplane come to truly know and understand airplanes? There's only one way: Get on board and go for a ride! To do so takes *faith*. It's not something you'll ever figure out. Like the spirit wind Jesus talked about with Nicodemus, the air lifts the plane in an unseen and mysterious way.

It's the same with embracing God's gift of being born from above into eternal life. We alone can make the decision to get on board. We have to choose to think "vertically" instead of "horizontally." And when we do, we step into the same eternal life that Jesus brought with Him when He walked out of the grave on Easter morning.

Our sins are forgiven because Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Our old life and its way of thinking is left behind.

We're born from above!