

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Great Chapters of the Bible: John 3

We were recently in a store where jewellery was displayed for sale. A card was placed by a glass tank of water containing live oysters. On payment of a certain amount the card advertised, "Select your own oyster. We will provide you with the pearl inside and value it. Guaranteed to be no less than the amount paid." Business is always seeking to encourage a good sale but this certainly assured the purchaser of a pearl as the bargain. In speaking of John 3, it has often been said that verse 16 contains "a pearl, complete and of the greatest value" to the reader. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

It is this, which makes the chapter one of the great chapters of the Bible. Today we will think a little of this chapter. We cannot do justice to the chapter as a whole in just one message but let us get a sense of what is being said.

Broadly, the chapter divides into two sections:

- The talk between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus – verses 1 to 21.
- The testimony of John "the Baptist" – verses 22 to 36.

### **The talk between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus – verses 1 to 21.**

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, obviously highly regarded as a teacher in Israel as the Lord spoke to him in verse 10 of being "the teacher of Israel". His perception of the Lord was well beyond that of those around. Although the Lord knew that "many believed... when they saw the miracles..." (2:23), their hearts were not touched and there was no change in them. But Nicodemus came with a desire for greater understanding of the Lord Himself. When he poses his statement – "Rabbi (teacher), we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (verse 2), the Lord Jesus stops him there and moves right on to what this man needs to know of the necessity for blessing. "Truly, truly, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God".

This is the heart of the matter, the real need Nicodemus had. As a good Jew, Nicodemus was seeking the kingdom of God. He would have known passages such as Ezekiel 36 and Isaiah 4:3 and would realise that new birth is a necessity. Religion, culture, morality or education are insufficient to save any man. It needs a complete change, new birth. All mankind is spiritually dead and has no spiritual life. The invaluable statements of this chapter clearly show that the way is being opened, not only for the Jew but also for the "world". We will discuss this a little later.

Verse 3 of our chapter says "Except a man be born again..." that is, entirely afresh, having a new source of life, "he cannot see the kingdom of God". The old nature in man, with which we were born, does not appreciate the things of God and a new power is required which can only come from a new life, a new nature. How clearly the words describe the essential need of every one to receive the new life. This now is applicable to all, Jew and Gentile, so we need to understand what the Lord is saying for ourselves. What does He mean? Nicodemus has difficulty with this statement and the Lord graciously answers his question.

The method is described in verse 5, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God". There is such a difference between what we are in "the flesh", as verse 6 calls it, that old and corrupt nature which every human being brings into the world and which can never be changed, and what we need to become, as those with a new "spiritual" life. Romans 8:8 says, "So they that are in the flesh cannot please God". First, the Lord emphasises that this is a question of a total new life. There is no question of reformation. The old nature, "the flesh", cannot be turned into something better. New birth brings a totally new nature, a divine nature, by the Holy Spirit and it is the only way to fit a person for the presence of God. The power of the Spirit of God, giving this new nature, will establish communion with God. "Ye must be born again", verse 7.

We need to consider the two things mentioned in verse 5, "born of water and of the Spirit". There are those who suggest that the "water" refers to Christian baptism. If this is so, it obviously means that only those baptised could enter the kingdom of God. It would also indicate that none of those who are baptised would perish. Clearly this does

not agree with other Scriptures such as verse 6, where being born of the Spirit only is mentioned; verses 16 and 36, where only believing brings everlasting life. Christian baptism had not been instituted nor could the meaning of baptism exist until the Lord had died and risen again. In Romans 6:3, Paul writes, "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into His death?" In Colossians 2:12, the same writer says, "Buried with Him in baptism..." The apostle Peter also tells us that baptism is "...not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God..." Contrary to those scriptures, John 3 is speaking of life, not death! Then what does the water signify?

Water speaks of the cleansing effect of the Word of God. We get the same power of the Word of God in other Scriptures. Writing to the Ephesians, 5:26, Paul, speaking of the church, says "That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word". In James 1:18 we read, "Of His own will begat He us (we are born again) with (or by) the Word of truth". Also, in 1 Peter 1:23 we read "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." So the Word of God is always effective in bringing all to a knowledge of God and water is a figure of that work.

The work of the Holy Spirit is essential. The water, or Word, can do nothing without the Holy Spirit who is the Agent in communicating the life of Christ to each individual, who is "born again". Now the wonderful truth is that no human operation can bring this about; it is wholly of the Spirit of God. As the wind blows, we cannot control it but only see its effect; so it is with the Spirit of God, blessing Jew, blessing Gentile, in His own wonderful way. This is the method of the tremendous transformation, which God has planned.

We come now to the means used for all this blessing. All has been achieved by the only One who meets the entire will of God. The Son of man, the Lord Jesus, has come down from heaven, not ceasing to be divine but taking humanity into union with the Godhead in His Person. This is the One who has now ascended into heaven. Our verses set out His work for sinners in coming down from heaven. Here is the One who is to be "lifted up" on the cross, crucified that you and I might have eternal life. What a work!

This is illustrated by a reference to the story in Numbers 21. Due to their dreadful complaint against God, Israel were subjected to the judgement of God. Poisonous serpents moved through the nation, biting the people so that they died. In answer to the instruction of God, Moses raised a serpent of brass upon a pole so that all who were in need could "look and live". Everyone who was bitten could trust God's provision and "look and live". What a powerful means of blessing this was!

In a similar way, the Son of man was "lifted up" for me and for you. The punishment for our sins has been fully dealt with; we can have eternal life (the new nature) through His work. Yet this has been accomplished in a way that the righteousness of God is completely satisfied. It was necessary that His Son became a man. He alone could live a perfect life well pleasing to God, and suffer on the cross for me, for you, so that this new life, which is everlasting, would become available to whosoever believes on Him. What mercy is shown towards sinful man; what grace from God in all our need! Mrs. Alexander wrote for children the hymn, which includes the verse:

*He knew how wicked man had been,  
And knew that God must punish sin ;  
So, out of pity, Jesus said  
He'd bear the punishment instead.*

So we see that what is necessary on our part is to "believe". This means that I accept that the excruciating suffering and death of the Lord Jesus on the cross entirely meet the requirements of God concerning my sin. His work is fully available to me as a sinner and I accept His work for myself. What a full blessing is available from God Himself to meet my hopeless situation!

Now we come to the mighty power of God in verses 16-21. We see the introduction of a further stage in the story of the Cross. We are brought into all blessing through the love of God. If we had stopped at verse 15, there could have been little peace or liberty for the believer. Yet this is assured because of God's love to us. Let us note the various details of this well known verse.

**"God."** All is of God. Without God there is no blessing, no Cross, no peace for the sinner. He alone has planned and promoted the work, praise be to His Name.

He **"so loved"**. How can we describe His divine love for man? This is the love that exists between Father and Son. The Lord Jesus prays in John 17:26, "I have declared unto them Thy Name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them." That same word for "love" is used for God's love for all men in our verse 16. It is the exercise of the Divine Will towards men and is not prompted by any good in us or any concern we have for God. It is deep and constant towards mankind who are entirely unworthy of His concern. This is the way

God has loved you and me. When He **“so loved”** it went beyond anything which could have been anticipated or practised by mankind. “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because God sent His Only Begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9 and 10). Paul could write, as he felt the tremendous blessing of the love of God, Galatians 2:20: “The Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me”!

This love is to **“the world”** – that is, to all human life on this earth. No one is excluded from the love of God.

It is demonstrated in the greatest gift possible – **“His Only Begotten Son”**. In every sense, the Lord Jesus shared the essential being of the Father and yet came as the Ambassador of the Father. The relationship with the Father is unique. **“God...gave His Only Begotten Son”**. Perhaps we get some sense of this giving by reference to Abraham of old. Note the stress on the words of God to Abraham as He bids this man to sacrifice his son. Genesis 22:2 – “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering...” God gave His Son for you and me!

The work of the cross is open to **“whosoever”**. No one is excluded; He loves all; all may **believe**. What an amazing offer from God Himself!

Believing brings the certainty of everlasting life without perishing. This is life in communion with God, life to be lived, in due course, with Him and in His presence for ever. There is no possibility of perishing. This word perish never means a cessation of existence or of consciousness. All who refuse to believe are in the sad position of awaiting judgement for their sins at the great white throne (Revelation 20:11) and of eternal punishment. Only the believer in the Lord Jesus is free and we see the great transformation which God has accomplished for man through the death of His Son.

Here is the complete gospel in a few words. To all who have believed, let us rejoice daily in what the Lord has done for us. Praise Him for all He has given for us! But if you are still unsure today, do not rest before you get this matter settled. You need a Saviour who can save you from sin. “Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation,” 2 Corinthians 6:2. It is in the Lord Jesus and His work at Calvary that the truth of Psalm 85:10 is fulfilled, “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

The chapter proceeds with a further point in verses 17 to 21. When the Lord Jesus came into the world, He did not come to condemn or judge the world. His one purpose was to save. The fact that salvation has been provided means that judgement is past. But with the coming of the Son of God, light on the whole matter of God’s love and the work of Christ is clearly demonstrated. No one can complain of lack of “light”. “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world” (verse 19). The problem is with us. “Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” What a condition in man is revealed!

### **The testimony of John “the Baptist” – verses 22 to 36.**

Now we come to the second part of the chapter, the testimony of John “the Baptist” – verses 22 to 36. John had disciples too and they began to get worried. The reason for their concern was in connection with the Lord Jesus. “You told us about Him”, they said, but “all men come to Him.” John had to remind them, “I am not the Christ”. John calls himself the friend of the bridegroom and testifies to the bridegroom who is to have the bride. He rejoices in the fact that the bridegroom has come. Then he made that clear statement, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” To John, the Lord Jesus was supreme and he is able to assert His heavenly character; “He that cometh from heaven is above all.” He also describes the Lord Jesus as the One whom God has sent (verse 34), and the One whom the Father loves (verse 35). There can be no commendation higher than this.

Let us refer now to the last verse. How triumphant and positive John is! “He that believeth on the Son hath (absolutely certainly) everlasting life.” Let us grasp this with all our conscious being. We have already understood that believing includes receiving all that the Lord Jesus has done. This brings each one into peace with God. There is no going back, no failure on the part of the Lord in keeping the one to whom He has given life. Some suggest that we can gain salvation and lose it again because of some sin. When the Lord Jesus died on the Cross and when that work became effective in your life, the matter was settled for ever. No one can rob you of the salvation He has provided, otherwise He would be no Saviour at all. We read in John 10:27-28, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” He then adds a double security by saying, “No man is able to pluck them out of My Father’s hand.”

There is a solemn warning also in verse 36. “He that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” We understand that the word “believeth” is better rendered “obeyeth”. “He that obeyeth not the Son”. Yes, we have all heard of Him, learned of what He has done for us and His great love for us. Do we turn away

now and refuse to obey Him in believing and receiving the salvation He offers? To those who will sin wilfully, refusing the blessing, the letter to the Hebrews uses the words in 10:27, there is “a certain fearful looking for of judgement...”

Let us finish by noting the word “must”. We have it three times in this chapter.

Verse 7 “Ye **must** be born again”. This is the necessity of the new birth.

Verse 14 “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so **must** the Son of man be lifted up”. The necessity of the death of the Lord Jesus for our salvation.

Verse 30 “He **must** increase but I **must** decrease”. The necessity that the Lord is supreme in our lives.

May the Lord help us to worship Him again today for this wonderful work of salvation. If you have any doubt, do not delay. Come to Him for forgiveness today.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we worship Thee for the love which brought Thee from the bliss of heaven and took Thee to die on the Cross. What salvation is ours when we trust in this work. We praise Thee once more, today, for Thy death which has met our need, and has fitted us to enter the presence of our Holy God and Father.

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