

Truth for Today

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The Necessity of New Birth and the Certainty of Eternal Life - John 3

Christians regard John's Gospel chapter 3 as one of the greatest chapters in the whole of Scripture, because it focuses on Gospel truths. Verse 16 is particularly loved because it's about God's love: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". However, it's important to stress at the beginning of this talk that it was the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who spoke these life-giving words. It's so vital to hear His voice! He said: "...he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and...has passed from death into life...the hour...now is when the [spiritually] dead...hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live [spiritually]", 5:24-25.

First of all, let's find out what John's Gospel chapter 3 says about Him.

1. It tells us that He is God's unique, one and only Son to whom all the work of God has been committed: "The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand", verse 35.
2. It describes Him as "He whom God has sent", verse 34. Over forty times this Gospel describes Him as the Sent One. He was sanctified and sent from God His Father on this mission: "...the Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world", 1 John 4:14.
3. As the Sent One, He brought the message of God to mankind: "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God", verse 34. But in His person He is also the living Word, see 1:1-14.
4. He is full of the Spirit of God: "...for God does not give the Spirit by measure", verse 34.
5. Because He came from heaven, He is supreme over all creation: "He who comes from above is above all", verse 31.
6. So great is He, that He could speak of Himself as being in heaven at the same time that He was on earth: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who **is** in heaven", verse 13.
7. Therefore He was able to tell of "heavenly things": "...what He has seen and heard, that He testifies", verses 32 and 11.

Chapter 3 records a conversation that the Lord Jesus had with Nicodemus, who came to see Him at night. Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time and many of the Jews were so impressed with the signs which He did, that they began to acknowledge Him. However, the Lord saw through their veneer: "...Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men", 2:24. By contrast, Nicodemus was different. Hence 3:1 commences with the word "But". "But there was a man from among the Pharisees, his name Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews", verse 1 (JN Darby Translation). Nicodemus' genuineness comes out as he explains his interest in Christ. He addressed Him with dignity: "Rabbi, we know You are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs You are doing if God were not with him", verse 2 (New International Version). Even though he was a devout Jew, Nicodemus only recognised the Lord as "a teacher come from God". But Jesus is also the Son of God who came from heaven above!

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'", verse 3. The reply was both direct and searching. It puzzled Nicodemus, who could only think of the impossibility of natural birth recurring for anyone: "...How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" verse 4. Again, Jesus was emphatic: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" verse 5. A new birth, that is a spiritual birth, is an absolute necessity, even for religious people such as Nicodemus. By using the phrase "most assuredly I say to you", Jesus stated that this is a fundamental lesson that every human being must learn. Spiritual life is required if God's kingdom is to be seen or entered! Jesus said "unless" meaning "must" – it's necessary and imperative for us sinners! But we can't do it ourselves – it's a birth, and like our natural birth, we're not involved at all! The writer, John, has already described the process - those who receive Christ and become "children of God", do so because they are "born of God". It's the only way – it won't happen by human means, desires or effort! "Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." 1:12-13 (New International Version).

The words "born again" can also be translated "born anew" or "born from above". They show that no one can have a relationship with God, apart from His intervention in new birth. Being "born again" is to be "born of water and the Spirit", verse 5. Water is symbolic of the word of God: "having been born again...through the word of God...which by the gospel was preached unto you", 1 Peter 1:23 and 25. It's especially descriptive of the cleansing effect of that word - the washing of water by the word: "You are already clean because of the word which I [Jesus] have spoken to you", 15:3. In other words, God's Holy Spirit uses His word in the Gospel to bring a person to repentance and to faith in Christ.

Jesus thrice repeats the phrase "born of the Spirit" to emphasise that new birth is entirely of God. He illustrated this activity of the Spirit by reference to wind: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit", verses 7-8. During the summer the devastating effects of hurricanes in the Caribbean made headline news. The effects of new birth are as visible as the effects of the wind. The fruit of the Spirit manifests itself in the lives of believers:

- "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and...loves him who is begotten of [God]", 1 John 5:1
- "Whoever has been born of God does not [practise] sin", 1 John 3:9
- "...everyone who practises righteousness is born of Him", 1 John 2:29
- "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world", 1 John 5:4
- "...he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him", 1 John 5:18.

Many people profess to be "born again" Christians. Those of us who make such a claim can only do so if we also give evidences of spiritual life! Otherwise, we are still in the flesh which is at enmity with God, see Romans 8:6-8. As Jesus said: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh", verse 6.

Nicodemus continued to be perplexed, but Jesus told him that, as the teacher of Israel, he should have known such "earthly things". The Old Testament, time and time again, had described the kingdom of God. Ezekiel had prophesied of the renewal, or new birth, of the nation of Israel, 36:24-38. God said He would sprinkle clean water on them to cleanse them from all filthiness and idolatry; that He would give them a new heart; and that He would put a new spirit within them. He would do this by His Spirit. He alone would do it.

The problem for Nicodemus wasn't ignorance. It was unbelief, which Jesus said was true of both Nicodemus and his fellow-men: "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things", verse 12. The same problem confronts any person who tries to be religious in order to gain favour with God. The solution is to believe in God's word and in Him whom God sent into the world to save sinners.

Jesus changed His conversation with Nicodemus from the necessity of new birth to the necessity of His own death, as the Son of Man, in order that eternal life might be made available to mankind. It was the first of the "heavenly things" that He said He would speak about to Nicodemus. This time, the Lord referred directly to Israel's forty years of history wandering through the desert, when they left Egypt to return to Canaan. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life", verse 14-15. Moses had provided God's way of salvation for those rebellious Israelites after they complained that there was no food or water, only manna to eat. Their complaints had resulted in them being bitten by poisonous snakes. "...Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived", Numbers 21:9. This pictured what had to happen for God to provide salvation from sin and the gift of eternal life – the Saviour had to be put on the cross ("lifted up") and there made sin to deliver us from the consequences of our own rebellion against God. "God...sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin, He condemned sin in the flesh", Romans 8:3. There was no other way; the Son of Man must be lifted up, verse 14; and each one of us must look to Him in faith to live eternally, verse 15.

Three times in John's Gospel Christ is mentioned as being "lifted up":

1. Here in verse 14, where the necessity of the cross is emphasised.
2. In 8:28, where the cross proved who Jesus is: "Then Jesus said to them, 'When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am'".
3. In 12:32, where everyone is compelled to encounter the Son of Man: "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself".

At this point, Jesus introduced Nicodemus to the real secret of the necessity of the cross – the love of God for fallen mankind. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life", verse 16. God's love is at the centre of the heavenly things brought from heaven by His Son! God's love is measured by the gift given, His only begotten Son, heaven's best! Nicodemus would

immediately think of Abraham: “[who]...offered up Isaac...his only begotten son”, Hebrews 11:17. In mount Moriah the amazing prophecy had been given: “God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering”, Genesis 22:8. When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching him, he announced: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” 1:29. Here in chapter 3, the Son Himself speaks of the divine plan of salvation.

The “unto all” global aspect of the Gospel was a new idea to Nicodemus, whose narrow thoughts of the kingdom of God were restricted to his own nation, Israel. Today we rejoice in the spread of the Gospel throughout the whole world because “God our Saviour desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”, 1 Timothy 2:4. However, whereas the Gospel is for everybody, it must be accepted by each individual. Only those who, with heart and will, place faith in the Son benefit from God's gift of eternal life in His Son. Jesus made this fact clear when He repeated the words “whoever believes in Him”, verse 15 and again in verses 16 and 18.

Jesus said that the believer in Him will not perish. To perish means to miss out on the best that God has for each of us, that is, heaven; and, as verses 17-19 make very clear, it really means to be eternally under God's judgement. That includes continuing in evil while living here upon earth, but more seriously, of experiencing the second death, when the wrath of God abides eternally upon the unbeliever, verse 36. It wasn't God's intention that this should occur. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”, verse 17. Verses 16-17 both begin with the word “for” and are explanations of verses 14-15. The lifting up of the Son of Man at the cross was necessary because:

1. God loves us so much that He doesn't want anyone of us to perish, verse 16.
2. the sending of His Son was to save not to condemn, verse 17.

However, the Gospel has introduced a state of affairs where everyone is openly accountable to God. To accept Christ, His Son, is to receive His forgiveness and to possess eternal life. “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”, verse 18. This verse shows that it isn't sufficient to say that you believe in Jesus or only certain things about Him. True faith is to “believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God”. In Scripture, a person's name is descriptive of all that that person is, his identity, character and renown. To believe in the Name of the Son of God is to really accept that He is the eternal God in Person. It's also to personally trust in everything that He has done, especially His sacrificial work upon the cross, His death, resurrection and ascension to God's right hand.

Why then do so many people in the world not believe in Christ? It's because of the sinful state of mankind. Jesus said: “...this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil”, verse 19. He, the Light of the World, produces one of two reactions:

1. “...everyone practising evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed”, verse 20.
2. “But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God”, verse 21.

Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ is the arbitrator of everybody who ever lives. He is either received as Saviour and Lord; or He is rejected and becomes the Judge! Verse 36 states that this is an active, wilful choice of every human being: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath” (New Revised Standard Version).

The incident, recorded in verses 22-34, about John the Baptist's replies to questions that his disciples raised concerning Jesus, highlights these issues. John Baptist is emphatic that everybody else and everything else is secondary to Christ's pre-eminence. Jesus Christ is the Son of God from heaven, who speaks the words of God, but whose testimony relatively few people actually believe. So it can be said, in general, “no one receives His testimony”, verse 32. However, he who **does** believe and receives Christ certifies that God is true, verse 33, and knows the certainty of eternal life, verse 36.

The challenge today is: have I, have you, really and truly believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God? To do so, is to be born again through the operation of God's Spirit and to receive the gift of eternal life. (Eternal life is to know God the Father and Jesus Christ whom He sent, 17:3). To refuse God's Son through unbelief is to be eternally condemned and judged under the abiding wrath of God. The Lord Jesus Christ makes these vital issues very clear in this chapter of John's Gospel!

Let's finish with part of a hymn of praise:

*To God be the glory, great things He hath done;
So loved He the world, that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.
Praise the Lord!*

Now a prayer:

*Oh! Heart of God, told out in wondrous love
So full and free,
When Jesus stooped from glory's heights above
To Calvary's tree;
Oh! Let that love in all its power and strength,
So speak that rebel hearts be won at length.*

*Oh! Love of Christ, so measureless and vast,
Salvation's won,
Which led to Calvary's gloom, until at last
The work was done.
Oh! Let that love in all its righteous power,
To troubled hearts bring peace this very hour.*

*Oh! Matchless is the story of God's love,
Surpassing thought,
Written by Jesus in His precious blood,
Which pardon brought,
And even now forgiveness yours may be,
Through faith in Him who died upon the tree.
Amen!*

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