

## John sermon #4

# Faith in Jesus (John 3)

In John 3, Jesus' disciples continue their journey of discovery—learning more about Jesus at a deeper level—now including how one may enter into a personal, saving relationship with the One who is teacher, bridegroom and witness. We begin in chapter 2:

### **1. Jesus the teacher (2:23 - 3:21)**

***2:23 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. 24 But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. 25 He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.***

In 2:23 John first mentions Jesus' "miraculous signs." Throughout his Gospel John presents Jesus as seeking followers who are willing to believe without seeing visible signs. Those who demand "miraculous signs" will be seen, not as unable to come to faith, but as impeded by their demand to see first before believing. These last verses of chapter 2 thus prepare us to meet Nicodemus who himself is struggling with belief.

***3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night...***

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin) (3:1) and a leading teacher of the Jews (3:10)—meaning that he was a Pharisee. He was apparently attracted to Jesus because of the miracles he did (2:23).

***2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "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."***

Why come to Jesus by night? Perhaps Nicodemus did not want to be seen by others, but more likely he simply wanted to have quiet uninterrupted

conversation with this new teacher “come from God.” John also uses the imagery of darkness to represent unbelief.

The fact that Nicodemus uses the plural “we” (3:2) and that Jesus’ responds in the plural (3:7, where ‘you’ in Greek is plural) may indicate that Nicodemus came to Jesus representing the religious leaders. In any case he was a man of high moral character, apparently deep religious hunger, and yet profound spiritual blindness (which is perhaps typified by his coming to Jesus in the dark of night).

In order to instruct Nicodemus in the basics of salvation, our Lord used four different illustrations.

#### **a. *New birth (3-7)***

***3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." 4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"***

#### **Illustration**

Benjamin Franklin the great statesman and inventor received letters from famous people from all over the world. One day he received a letter from British preacher and evangelist George Whitefield. It said: “I find that you grow more and more famous in the learned world. As you have made such progress in investigating the mysteries of electricity, I now humbly urge you to give diligent heed to the mystery of the new birth. It is a most important and interesting study and, when mastered, will richly repay you for your pains.”

Indeed the new birth is a mystery. And to explain it Jesus began with that which was familiar (birth being a universal experience). The word translated “again” also means “from above.” Though all human beings have experienced natural birth on earth, if they wish to receive eternal life (which is what John means by entering the kingdom) they must experience a supernatural spiritual birth from above.

But Nicodemus did not understand – and again we encounter John’s theme of the blindness of sinners. Jesus was speaking about a spiritual birth, but Nicodemus thought only of a physical birth. The situation is no different

today. When you talk with people about being born again, they often begin to discuss their family's religious heritage, their church membership, religious ceremonies, and so on.

***5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."***

Being a patient teacher, our Lord picked up on Nicodemus' words and further explained the new birth as being "born of water and the Spirit." Some think the reference to water points to baptism. But there is no hint of this in the passage. John probably intends that we take water and Spirit together having to do with the new birth mentioned in v 3. The OT uses the imagery of water and spirit (wind) to speak to the act of God in cleansing his people (Ezek. 36:25–27). In this case, Nicodemus was being told that a spiritual experience of regeneration was needed for a proper appreciation of seeing and entering into the kingdom of God (eternal life).

***6 "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"***

*Flesh* is here pointing to human nature, which can reproduce only humankind not the children of God. Being born of the Spirit requires a radical change, a new beginning. The gist of Jesus' statement is that the character of those born is determined by the source that gives them birth. In a physical birth the child inherits the nature of the parents. The same is true with the spiritual 'birth from above.' Through regeneration we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Nature determines appetite, which explains why the Christian has an appetite for the things of God (1 Peter 2:2, 3). He has no desire to go back to the foul things of the world that once appealed to him (2 Peter 2:20–22). He feeds on the Word of God and grows into spiritual maturity (Heb. 5:11–14).

Of course, birth involves life; and spiritual birth from above involves *God's* life. John uses the word *life* thirty-six times in his Gospel. The opposite of life is death, and the person who has not believed in Jesus Christ does not have God's life, eternal life, abundant life. *You do not manufacture Christians any more than you manufacture babies!* The only way to enter God's family (kingdom) is through the new birth (John 1:11–13).

Birth involves a future, and we are “born again to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3, NASB). A newborn baby cannot be arrested because he or she has no past. When you are born again into God’s family, your sins are forgiven and forgotten, and your future is bright with a living hope.

Nicodemus must have had a surprised and yet bewildered look on his face, for the Lord had to say, “You should not be surprised at my saying...” (3:7). But Nicodemus was born a Jew. He was a part of God’s covenant people. (Rom. 9:4, 5) Certainly his birth was better than that of a Gentile or a Samaritan! And his life was exemplary, for he was a faithful member of the Jewish ruling class. He could well understand Jesus telling Gentiles that they had to be born again, but certainly not the *Jews!*

### **b. *The wind (8-13)***

***8 “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.” 9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. 10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man.”***

It is likely that the evening wind was blowing just then as Nicodemus and Jesus sat on the housetop conversing. The word *wind* in both Hebrew and Greek can also be translated “spirit.” One of the symbols of the Spirit of God in the Bible is the wind or breath (Job 33:4; John 20:22; Acts 2:2). Like the wind, the Spirit is invisible but powerful; and you cannot explain or predict the movements of the wind.

When Jesus used this symbol, Nicodemus, who was “Israel’s teacher” (a technical term for a Pharisee) should have remembered the promise of regeneration in Ezekiel 36:26 and the allegory describing it in 37:1–14. But sadly, Israel, including Nicodemus who here represents the nation, despite having the Hebrew Scriptures, morality and religion was dead and hopeless. They lacked the life of the Spirit promised by Ezekiel. And that is

the problem, because faith is rooted in personal experience with the Spirit: The new birth isn't something we do but something God does.

Nicodemus also had an authority problem. He and the other religious leaders would not submit to the authority of Christ's witness (3:11). We will see this "authority conflict" increase as we go forward in John. The religious leaders claimed to believe Moses, yet they could not believe Jesus (5:37–47). The Pharisees were more concerned about the praise of men than the praise of God (12:37–50). "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (3:12). Jesus was not merely reporting from 'afar' on heavenly realities—he was an eyewitness 'from heaven' and thus speaks with unsurpassed authority (see 3:31). [Note: this statement has nothing to do with whether or not heaven is the reward of the saved—that's not the subject here].

### **c. *The serpent on the pole (14-18)***

***14 "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."***

It is not clear if what is said here are Jesus' words as he continues in discussion with Nicodemus or if they are words of commentary from John. In any case, the story alluded to here from Numbers 21:4–9 was certainly familiar to Nicodemus. It is a story of sin, for Israel rebelled against God and had to be punished. God sent fiery serpents that bit the people so that many died. It is also a story of grace, for Moses interceded for the people and God provided a remedy. He told Moses to make a brass serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see. Any stricken person who looked at the serpent would immediately be healed. So, it is also a story of faith: when the people looked by faith, they were saved.

The verb *lifted up* has a dual meaning: to be crucified (John 8:28; 12:32–34) and to be glorified and exalted. In his Gospel, John points out that our Lord’s crucifixion was actually the means of his glorification (John 12:23ff). The cross was not the end of his glory; it was the means of his glory (Acts 2:33).

Much as the serpent was lifted up on that pole, so the Son of God would be lifted up on a cross. Why? To save us from sin and death. In the camp of Israel, the solution to the “serpent problem” was not in killing the serpents, making anti-venom medicine, pretending they were not there hiding in your tent, passing anti-serpent laws, or climbing the pole. The answer was in looking by faith at the uplifted serpent.

The whole world has been bitten by sin, and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). God sent His Son to die, not only for Israel, but for a whole world. How is a person born from above? How is he or she saved from eternal perishing? By believing in Jesus Christ—by looking to him in faith. John makes this clear in 3:16, which presents salvation in a single verse which is paraphrased by one author this way: “This is how God showed His love to the world, He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have life eternal” This verse presents the *why* as well as the *how* of God’s redeeming love.

### **Illustration**

On January 6, 1850, a snowstorm almost crippled the city of Colchester, England; and a teenage boy was unable to get to the church he usually attended. So he made his way to a nearby Primitive Methodist chapel, where an ill-prepared layman was substituting for the absent preacher. His text was Isaiah 45:22—“Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” For many months this young teenager had been miserable and under deep conviction; but though he had been reared in church (both his father and grandfather were preachers), he did not have the assurance of salvation. The unprepared substitute minister did not have much to say, so he kept repeating the text. “A man need not go to college to learn to look,” he shouted. “Anyone can look—a child can look!” About that time, he saw the visitor sitting to one side, and he pointed at him and said, “Young man, you look very miserable. Young man, look to Jesus Christ!” The young man did look by faith, and that was how the great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was converted.

The difference between perishing and living, and between condemnation and salvation, is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus could well have come to this world as a judge and destroyed every rebellious sinner; but in love, he came to this world as our Savior, *and He died for us on the cross!* He became the “uplifted serpent.” The serpent in Moses’ day brought physical life to the dying tribes of Israel; but Jesus Christ gives eternal life to anyone in the world who trusts him. He has salvation for every nation in the whole world.

#### **d. Light and darkness (19-21)**

***19 “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”***

Light is one of the major images used in the Bible—beginning at creation where the light and darkness were divided. And now the coming into the world of the Light of the World has divided those who love the Light from those who embrace the darkness.

#### **2. Jesus the bridegroom (3:22–30)**

***22 After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. 23 Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized. 24 (This was before John was put in prison.) 25 An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan— the one you testified about-- well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." 27 To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' 29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. 30 He must become greater; I must become less.***

Until John the Baptist was arrested by Herod and put into prison, his ministry overlapped that of the Lord Jesus. John did not want anyone to follow him; his ministry was to point to Christ. But when two popular preachers are involved in similar work, it is easy for both friends and enemies to get caught up in competition and comparison. It appears that some of John's disciples started the argument. It began on doctrinal grounds—the matter of purifying—but soon moved to personal grounds.

Without realizing it, John's disciples were putting him into a situation of competing against the Lord Jesus! "Everyone is going to him" (John 3:26) sounds like a wail of despair. How did John the Baptist handle this controversy? To begin with, he stated a conviction: all ministry and blessing come from God, so there can be no competition (John 3:27). Paul would have agreed with this (1 Cor. 3:1–9; 4:1–7). Our gifts and opportunities come from God, and he alone must get the glory. Then John used a beautiful illustration. He compared Jesus to the bridegroom and himself only to the best man (John 3:29). Once the bridegroom and bride had been brought together, the work of the best man was completed. What a foolish thing it would be for the best man to try to "upstage" the bridegroom and take his place. John's joy was to hear the voice of the Bridegroom and know that He had claimed his bride.

Even before his birth, John the Baptist rejoiced in the Lord (Luke 1:44). John was content to be the voice announcing Jesus to be the Word (John 1:23). Jesus was the Light, and John the Baptist was the witness pointing to the Light (John 1:6–8).

The image of the Bridegroom would have been significant to the Jewish people, for God had a "marriage covenant" with the nation (Isa. 54:5; 62:4ff; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Ezek. 16:8; Hosea 2:19ff). Alas, Israel had been unfaithful to her vows, and God had to put her away temporarily. Today, God is calling out a people for his name, the church, the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:1–3; Eph. 5:22–33).

The word *must* is used in three significant ways in this chapter. There is the "must" of the sinner (John 3:7), the "must" of the Savior (John 3:14), and the "must" of the servant (John 3:30).

### **3. Jesus the witness (3:31–36)**

The emphasis in this paragraph is on “testimony” (verse 32), one of the key subjects in John’s Gospel. The Greek word used here occurs 47 times in John and is translated “witness”, “testimony” or “testify.” John gave testimony (as a witness) to Jesus (John 1:7; 5:33), but Jesus was himself a witness to the truth. Why should we heed his testimony? For several reasons.

**a. *He came from heaven (31)***

***<sup>31</sup> "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.***

He was not simply called from heaven, or empowered by heaven; He *came* from heaven. It was this claim that the Jews disputed, because they knew it was his claim to be God (John 6:38–42). John the Baptist certainly was not “from above,” nor did he claim to be. No earthly messenger of God came “from above.” Only Jesus Christ can make that claim and prove it to be true. Since Jesus came from heaven, he represents the Father; and to reject his witness is to reject the Father (John 5:23). We know that his witness is true because he is the true God. We can trust it and rely on it.

**b. *It comes from him firsthand (32-33)***

***<sup>32</sup> He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. <sup>33</sup> The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.***

He shares what He has seen and heard from the Father (John 8:38). Those who receive his witness *and act on it* know by personal experience that his witness is true (John 7:17). Our Lord’s teachings are not to be studied intellectually, separated from everyday life. It is when we obey his word and put it into practice that we see its truth and experience its power.

**c. *The father has authorized his Son (34-35)***

***34 For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.***

God sent him (another key theme in John's Gospel); God gave him the Word; God gave him the Spirit; and God gave him all things (John 13:3). What a commissioning! To reject the Son's witness is to rebel against the highest authority in the universe.

We usually think of God's love for a lost world (John 3:16), but John reminds us of the Father's love for Jesus, his dearly beloved Son (Matt. 3:17). It is a love that holds nothing back—he has given him all things and shows him all things (John 5:20). Therefore, when we receive him we share in what the Father has given him ('everything'). But to reject Christ—to reject his witness—is to sin against love and light...and life.

#### ***d. We might escape the wrath of God (36)***

***36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."***

This verse parallels John 3:18 and makes it clear that there can be no neutrality when it comes to the witness of Jesus Christ: we either believe and trust him or we reject him.

"Eternal life" does not simply mean never ending life. The believer possesses that life right now! It is the life of God in the believer. The opposite of eternal life is eternal death, the wrath of God. A person does not have to die and go to hell to be under the wrath of God. "Whoever does not believe stands condemned already" (John 3:18). The verdict has already been given, but the sentence has not yet been executed. Why? Because God is patient and long-suffering, and continues to call sinners to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

## **Conclusion**

- As we have seen, John chapter 3 emphasizes the personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ that comes through faith in him: It is a living relationship that begins with the new birth, the birth from

above. When we receive Jesus Christ into our lives, we share his very life and become children in the family of God (we ‘see’ [verse 3] and ‘enter’ [verse 5] the Kingdom).

- It is a loving relationship for he is the Bridegroom and we are a part of the bride. Like John the Baptist, we desire that Jesus Christ increase as we decrease. He must receive all honor and glory.
- It is a *learning relationship*, for He is the faithful Witness who shares the riches of God’s truth with us.

Let us never forget the cost of these riches. For us to be born into God’s family, Jesus Christ had to die—he had to endure the hatred and condemnation of men. He was lifted up on the cross so that we might experience forgiveness and eternal life.

May we never take this for granted!

***Sermon Series*** is provided by Ted Johnston via Tom and Alberta Ecker. It assists ... in Bible studies in series typically covering whole books of the Bible.

***This issue continues in the gospel of John.*** It features material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe with additional material from *The New Bible Commentary* and *The Parable of Joy* by Michael Card.

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OT Old Testament

## **GROWING in our RELATIONSHIP with the TRIUNE GOD**

### **John 3:1-7 "Born Anew"**

Have you been born anew?

### **John 3:8 "The Wind Blows Where It Chooses"**

What do you know about the Holy Spirit?

### **John 3:9-15 "How Can These Things Be?"**

How does the reference to Moses help?

**John 3:16 "God So Loved the World"**

When did you first learn this verse? is

**John 3:17-21 "This Is the Judgment"**

What is judgment?

**John 3:22-24 "Baptizing at Aenon"**

How is baptism an appropriate link?

**John 3:25-30 "...I Must Decrease"**

Do you think it was difficult for John to take second place?

**John 3:31-36 "He Who Comes from Heaven"**

What is the difference between John and Jesus?

**Please See Sermon Series Study Guide: John #4**