

A MORE DETAILED LOOK AT JOHN CHAPTER THREE



JOHN'S ACCOUNT OF THE WORD

This web site's theme is the third chapter of the Gospel of John. To fully understand it, it is necessary to see it in context. It is easy to get things mixed up. Throughout the Gospel of John, the writer never identifies himself or uses his own name, but he frequently mentions John the Baptist. Thus, we need to be careful when we read his account. Is the writer referring to himself as John the Apostle, or to someone else by the same name, John the Baptist?

CHAPTER ONE

The Word became flesh

John starts by explaining in chapter one that Jesus is the Word, who was at the beginning (1:1-5). Everything that came into existence, was because of Him. The writer then introduces John the Baptist (v6). The writer clearly states that this John was not the light but had to be a witness for the light (v9). The next vital piece of information is found in verses 11 and 12: His own people (the Jews) did not accept him. However, all those (Jews and non-Jews) who accepted Him, He gave the power to become children of God. This verse is the forerunner of John 3:16. He gave the right to become children of God to those who believe in His Name. The Word became flesh (v14) and was on earth for some 33 years where people saw His glory.

The writer then expands his description of John the Baptist's mission (v15), testifying of the Word. Responding to questions by religious leaders, he insists that he is not the Christ (v20) but that he is the one who calls out in the wilderness to make straight the way for the Lord (the writer quotes from Isaiah 40:3). He continues to explain John's mission until verse 28. Then he introduces Jesus to mankind for the first time - there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (v29). This was Jesus' one and only mission. The writer confirms that he saw John the Baptist saying that he saw the Spirit descending from heaven (from God the Father) on Jesus like a dove (v32) and He (the Holy Spirit) remained on Him (Jesus). At this stage John had probably only briefly met Jesus in person. What we have here is the full revelation of the Holy Trinity - God the Father (in heaven); the Holy Spirit; and Jesus, the Son of God.

The rest of chapter one is devoted to Jesus' calling of His disciples (v35-52).

CHAPTER TWO

The first miracle

In chapter two the focus is on two events: the first miracle performed in public, turning water into wine (v1-11); and the cleansing of the temple (v13-25). The importance of these two events is as follows: In the first, we see water turned into wine. There was no fanfare or public spectacle when the miracle was performed. Instead, because of His divine power, natural laws are simply put aside. It would be the same later with all the other miracles. In the

second, He cleanses the temple. This paves the way for Him cleansing us as a temple for Him to reside in. It also shows that He comes to replace the temple, made by man, with a temple from God.

By now, many people had witnessed the miracles and signs He performed. We are not told what those signs and miracles were, but the writer states in verse 23 that many believed in His Name, because they saw the signs and miracles.

It is against this backdrop that the writer introduces us to what can be described as the first of many confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders, although in this instance it was not meant to be argumentative, but one of explaining exactly what His mission to Earth was about.

CHAPTER THREE

Let us first read the full chapter. The normal paragraph layout has been removed and each verse is put in a separate line to facilitate easier reading.

You Must be Born Again

- 1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.
- 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”
- 3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
- 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”
- 5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’
- 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
- 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”
- 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?
- 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.
- 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?
- 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
- 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
- 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so Loved the World

- 16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him (See John 1:12!) should not perish but have eternal life.
- 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

John the Baptist Exalts Christ

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.

23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized

24 (for John had not yet been put in prison).

25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.

26 And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.”

27 John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’

29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

30 He must increase, but I must decrease.”

31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.

32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.

33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.

34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

CHAPTER THREE, PART ONE

Jesus teaches Nicodemus

We often only see chapter three as the nightly visit of Nicodemus to Jesus, and read no further than verse 21, but there is much more to that. While the first section, verses 1 to 21, has to do with Jesus' teaching Nicodemus about rebirth, the next section, verses 22 to 36, focuses again on John the Baptist, and his diminishing role. He paved the way for Jesus and now he must become less so that Jesus can become more (v30).

Nicodemus was an influential religious leader, with a Greek name that suggests an educated background, a Pharisee and a member of the ruling Jewish Council (v1). By now the religious leaders were aware of the effect Jesus had on people, were probably getting worried, and

Nicodemus comes to find out more about Him. Note that Nicodemus comes at night (v2), to not draw any attention to himself. It could be that during the day the crowds mobbed Jesus and Nicodemus would not be able to speak to Him in private. He says that they, the religious leaders, know that He is a teacher, and one of good standing, hence he calls Him Rabbi. He admits that He comes from God because no one else was able to do these signs if God was not with Him.

We must remember that the Jews were still expecting their Messiah, but their expectation was that of a military leader who would overthrow their oppressors, the Romans. Nicodemus figures that if Jesus is the Messiah, then He is not acting in a way the Jews would expect.

Without responding in the way Nicodemus would have wanted, Jesus immediately introduces him to the concept of being born again (v3). This surprises Nicodemus and his response is awkward. He asks how one who is old already can be born again as it is not possible to enter the mother's womb and be born again (v4). The Jews held the belief that they alone were guaranteed a place in the Kingdom of God and so Nicodemus sees no point in a "rebirth".

Of course, this sort of rebirth was not what Jesus meant, so He answers this by taking His point further - the person must be born of water and the Spirit, without which he cannot enter the Kingdom of God (v5). He then clearly qualifies two domains. That which is born of the flesh, through man, is just that - flesh. That which is born of the Spirit, is spirit (v6). There must be a transformation from one domain to the other, and this is through rebirth.

Nicodemus is still baffled by Jesus' teaching and asks how these things can happen (v9). Jesus confronts him by asking how it is that he who is a religious leader, in fact the leader, does not know this as Nicodemus would have studied the prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah. Jesus finds it hard to understand how the Jewish leaders find it so difficult to accept the testimony (v11). If they cannot even understand the earthly things, how are they going to understand heavenly things?

Jesus gives Nicodemus a lesson in Old Testament teaching - just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness (Num 21:6-10), so the Son of Man must be lifted up (crucified), so that those who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life (v15). Now this sounds the same as the famous verse, John 3:16, doesn't it? Let us first look at what happened in the wilderness with Moses and the snake.

Moses and the snake

The recorded incident in Numbers 21 refers to a time when Israel was still travelling through the desert on the way to the Promised Land. They came across many enemies and mostly defeated them. One was the king of Arad, the Canaanite. He fought against Israel and took some of them captive. Israel then vowed to destroy Arad's cities and God granted them their wish.

While journeying further, they lamented and spoke against God and Moses, asking why they had to be brought out of Egypt only to die in the desert. They had to move away from Canaan, towards the wilderness to get around Edom as the inhabitants refused to allow them to continue through their territory. This was a relatively new generation of Israelites, but they made the same mistakes those before them did, by not fully trusting God's provision for them.

To teach them a lesson, God sent snakes to bite people and many of them died. This was a fulfilment of the promise that none of those who left Egypt would make it to the Promised Land. The people were filled with remorse when they saw how many were killed by the serpents and asked Moses to intervene. God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. Every person who was bitten and then looked at the pole, would live. Bronze was a symbol of judgement. Note that the bronze snake was not an idol, which the making of is prohibited, but a symbol of a deeper message.

There is clearly a miracle here - how could just looking at a resemblance of the same animal that had killed others, allow some who had already been bitten, to live and not die? The lesson is clear - Jesus had to be crucified, and whoever after that accepts the plan of God to let His Son die on the cross, will not die in his sins.

In the end, just as those who had sinned and were bitten by snakes in the desert, looked up to the snake on the pole and were saved, those who look at the Son of Man on the cross and accept His healing of their sins in faith, will receive life! Jesus never sinned, but He was made sin for our sake. Just as the snake was a picture of evil to be dealt with, Jesus had to become sin so that we could be saved.

It is clear then, that to understand John 3:16, we must first read verses 14 and 15.

Jesus continues to teach Nicodemus about the rebirth

Jesus uses the example of the snake on the pole, something Nicodemus knew about, to illustrate His own purpose on Earth. He states in verse 15 that the Son of man must be lifted up (referring to His death on a cross), so that those who believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. Then Jesus emphasises it. God so loved the entire world's population, past and future, that He gave His only Son, so that all who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life (v16). God's purpose with Jesus' earthly mission was never to condemn mankind, but so that the world may be saved through Him (v17).

Now comes the division: whoever believes is not condemned, but he who does not believe is already condemned because he did not believe in the name of the only Son of God. What is the condemnation? Verse 19 states that the condemnation is that the Light (Jesus) entered the world but men loved the darkness (evil) more than Him. Why? Because of their wicked works. Those who do evil do not like the fact that the Light exposes their wicked deeds and they keep in the darkness so that their works may not be exposed (v20).

The other ones are those who do good deeds and live by the truth and come towards the Light so that their works can be seen as being done in the sight of God (v21).

We are not told what the outcome of the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus was but in a very effective way, He took a lesson from the Law, which Nicodemus was well versed in, and applied it to His mission on Earth. Nicodemus should now understand that the Messiah's purposes at the time was not to free the Jews from their Roman oppressors, but to free mankind from its sins.

CHAPTER THREE, PART TWO

The second testimony of John the Baptist

Chapter One, verses 15-34, mentions the first testimony of John the Baptist. Now, in chapter three verses 22-36, we have a second testimony. Jesus and his disciples by now moved around a lot. They were in Judea, baptising people and not far from them, at the same time, John and his group were baptising people too. At this stage John had not yet been put in prison. John's disciples came to him asking about ceremonial washing. They state that they know that Jesus and His disciples were in the same area and many people were going there to be baptised instead of coming to John. John defends this by saying that he is not the Christ but that he was sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the way. He uses an example that all Jews of the time would have been accustomed to. A wedding was a special ceremony, and it is fitting that the first miracle occurred during a wedding feast (John 2). Jesus condones a wedding as an outward display of a unity between one man and one woman, and thus it has God's blessing.

John says that he is happy to be the friend of the bridegroom. Traditionally, a good friend of the bridegroom arranged the wedding ceremony and it was important that everything went well. At the wedding, this friend listens with excitement to the voice of the bridegroom (Jesus) to his bride (believers). He is content with this and reiterates - He must become greater and I must become less. He acknowledges the supreme authority of Him who comes from above (v31). John makes it clear that not everyone who hears the message will respond to it (v32) but those who do, certify that God is truthful. He who was sent by God has the Spirit in unlimited measure. God the Father loves the Son and placed everything in His hands. John the Baptist is now passing on the work to the One and His disciples for whom John paved the way. As Jesus' ministry grows, to that of John will diminish.

The writer ends with a stern warning: he who believes in the Son, has eternal life. He who rejects the message of salvation, will not see eternal life and the wrath of God remains on them. The choice is yours and you must live with the consequences. John the Baptist confirms in verse 36 exactly what Jesus told Nicodemus in verses 15 and 16 - that to believe in the Son of God, leads to eternal life, and nothing else.

CONCLUSION

John Chapter Three is an amazing summary of God's salvation plan for man. Many things are so obvious here:

1. God loves us.
2. We must be born again.
3. We must be born again of water and Spirit.
4. People died in the desert because they did not have faith, despite God's provision. The solution was the snake on the pole so that those who were obedient and looked at the snake on the pole, recovered from the snake bites and lived. Some did not obey and died.
5. Jesus's death on the cross is our salvation and gives us eternal life. Some will not obey and die in their sins.
6. God did not send His Son to condemn the world but to save people.
7. The choice is simple: believe and be saved; or do not believe and be condemned.

8. There is a battle between darkness (the devil) and light (Jesus): The unrighteous like the darkness so that their deeds are not exposed. The righteous come to the light so that it can be shown that their works were done in the sight of God.
9. John the Baptist is not envious when he, who had baptised people before Jesus did, hears that Jesus and His disciples are also baptising.
10. He is adamant: Jesus must become more and he, John, must become less.
11. He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who does not, does not have eternal life. In addition, the wrath of God remains on him.

Note that this is a work in progress and more information is added regularly.