

Notes on John 3

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Discussion with Nicodemus and John's Further Testimony – Chap. 3

Discussion with Nicodemus Regarding the New Birth — 3:1-21

Verse 1

1. Who came to Jesus by night? What else do you know about him?

Nicodemus

Around this time Jesus had a discussion with a man named Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews.

The Pharisees were the sect that prided themselves on strict defense and practice of the law. In reality they often followed their own manmade traditions rather than or in addition to the law (see on Matt. 15:1ff). And their “obedience” was often an outward ritual, lacking any inward sincerity or genuine concern about God and their relationship to Him. In short, Jesus often convicted them of hypocrisy, because their “righteousness” was an outward appearance before men without proper attitude toward God or others (Matt. 23). Nicodemus, however, appears to have been more sincere than most of the others.

John 7:50-52 later says Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish council (Sanhedrin) – this was probably the sense in which he was a “ruler.” As such, he tried to get the council to give Jesus a fair hearing. John 19:38-42 says he was one who helped prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Clearly he became a disciple of Jesus at some point.

Verse 2

2. What conclusion had he already reached about Jesus?

Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus' miracles.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, though we are not told the reason why he chose at this time. Some speculate that his prominent position made him hesitant to be identified with Jesus, at least until he had more proof.

He called Jesus “Rabbi” and said people knew Jesus was a teacher from God, because no one could do signs like Jesus did unless God was with Him. Perhaps he was among those in 2:23 who had witnessed Jesus’ miracles at the feast. In any case, he knew of the miracles and had reached the conclusion that the miracles proved Jesus was from God.

This is the correct understanding of the purpose of miracles: they demonstrated that the man, through whom they were done, was a man from God. They were an indication of God’s approval or confirmation of the man’s teachings and claims. Note that Jesus never rebuked Nicodemus for this statement, though He rebuked him for several other misunderstandings as the discussion proceeded. John no doubt includes this statement because it helps confirm the theme of His message regarding who Jesus is. See notes on 2:1-11 for a further discussion of the purpose of miracles.

It is not clear how well Nicodemus understood Jesus’ purpose and teachings at this point, yet he did know that Jesus was from God. He calls Him “Rabbi” and a teacher from God, but does not yet appear willing to confess Him as the Christ or the Son of God.

Verse 3

3. What did Jesus say one must do to enter the kingdom of God?

Jesus begins a discussion of the new birth.

John does not record any specific response Jesus gave to the claim that He was a teacher come from God. Instead, if Nicodemus accepted Him as a teacher, then Jesus would proceed to the next step and give him the teaching that he needed to hear.

So Jesus said that no one could see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. He emphasized the significance of this truth by saying, “most assuredly” (NKJV) or “verily, verily.” Subsequent discussion shows this new birth was the spiritual rebirth by which one becomes a child of God, a member of Jesus’ kingdom, the church (see notes on v5).

Note that this new birth is so essential that one cannot receive eternal life without it. The expression implies a new relationship with God by becoming one of His children. Then it implies a complete remaking of the person so that he puts off the old man and puts on the new man (Col. 3). Note that John had introduced this concept in 1:12,13 (see notes there).

Verse 4.

4. What did Nicodemus say in response that showed he misunderstood?

5. List and explain at least 3 other passages about being born again, becoming a child of God, or receiving a new life.

Nicodemus expresses confusion.

Nicodemus then asked how a person could be born again when he has already been born. Can he go back into his mother’s womb and be born?

No doubt Jesus’ statement was especially shocking to Nicodemus. Like other Jews, he thought one deserved to be part of God’s kingdom simply because he was born a descendant of Jacob – an Israelite. Physical birth was what mattered. Nicodemus especially had high position as a ruler, Pharisee, and teacher (v10). He surely thought that he, of all people, did not need any new kind of birth. Surely he did not need to go back and start over in his relationship to God like other people who were not even trying to serve Him. But Jesus shocked him by saying that no one could enter the kingdom without an entirely new birth. Nicodemus needed this as surely as did anyone else.

Note once again how Jesus’ hearer misunderstood His statements, because he took Jesus’ spiritual statements in a physical way (see notes on 2:19,20). It is not always easy, when reading Jesus’ statements, to know which way He intended the statement to be taken, but we need to take care we do not err as Nicodemus did.

Note in particular that it was Nicodemus, not Jesus, who introduced into the discussion the concept of the **physical** birth, and he did it in **error**. Jesus made no references to physical birth when He brought up the new birth.

Verse 5

6. What two aspects of the new birth did Jesus identify in v5? (Thought question: What role does the “Spirit” play in the new birth?)

7. List 3 other passages showing that water baptism is essential to salvation.

8. Case Study: Some people say the “water” in v5 refers to physical birth. How would you respond? How did the subject of physical birth enter this discussion? Does any other command of God require water besides baptism?

Born of the water and the Spirit

To help Nicodemus see the point, Jesus explained what the new birth of v3 involves, so he would realize it was not physical birth Jesus was discussing. Note the parallel between v3 and v5:

V3	V5
Most assuredly	Most assuredly
I say to you	I say to you
unless one	unless one
is born again	is born of water and the Spirit
he cannot see	he cannot enter
the kingdom of God	the kingdom of God

Obviously v3 and v5 are exactly parallel. Jesus is restating His point so Nicodemus can understand what He meant the first time. The restatement shows that “born again” means “born of water and the Spirit.” V5 is not describing two different births, as many people claim. It is describing further the new birth, stating that the new birth involves two elements — water and Spirit.

Other important passages regarding the new birth help us understand this one. One can only be born again by obeying the gospel — 1 Peter 1:22-25. Hearing and believing gives one the right to become a child of God, but does not automatically make one a child of God — John 1:12. To be born again, one must come into Christ — 2 Cor. 5:17. To come into Christ and thereby become a child of God, one who believes must be baptized — Rom. 6:3,4; Gal. 3:26,27 (see also Mark 16:15,16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21).

What is the “water”?

“Born of the water” must refer to water baptism because: (1) Baptism is the only command in the New Testament that requires the use of water (Acts 8:35-39; 10:47; John 3:23; Heb. 10:22; etc.). (2) Many other passages, already cited, show that water baptism is essential to forgiveness. (3) Further, other passages, already cited, show specifically that water baptism is an essential element of the new birth. (4) We will also notice later several verses that tie baptism to hearing the gospel like John 3:5 does.

Some people claim the water of John 3:5 refers to the physical birth (the “water” surrounding the baby in the mother’s womb). However, (1) the parallel to v3 (above) shows that v5 is not talking about two separate births nor about physical birth at all. It is explaining two elements involved in one birth, the new birth. (2) “Water” is nowhere in the New Testament used to refer to physical birth. (3) V6 refers to physical birth as born of the “flesh.” If he meant physical birth in v5, why say “water” in v5 and then say “flesh” in v6? Why not use the same term both times if He meant the same thing?

(4) Physical birth is mentioned in John 3; but it was brought up, not by Jesus, but by Nicodemus as a result of his confusion and misunderstanding (v4). Jesus restated the truth about the new birth (v5), then He contrasted the physical birth to the new in v6. But He never included physical birth, along with the new birth, as something essential to enter the kingdom in v5. He discussed physical birth only to correct the confusion Nicodemus had introduced.

So Jesus here emphatically stated that baptism is essential to enter the kingdom of God. No one can be born again without it. When people seek to deny that Jesus ever taught the necessity of baptism to salvation, they need to consider carefully this passage along with Mark 16:16 and the other passages cited above.

For further discussion of the purpose of baptism and the need for obedience, see our articles on these subjects on our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

What is the “Spirit”?

The Holy Spirit revealed the message of the gospel, which one must learn and believe in order to be forgiven. The word is the “seed” by which one is born again (1 Peter 1:23; etc.). The word is the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17). It is the tool or means used by the Spirit to accomplish His word in conversion (2 Peter 1:21; Eph. 3:3-5; John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:10-13; etc.).

To be born of water and the Spirit means to learn the gospel message revealed by the Spirit, believe it, and obey it in baptism. This same exact connection is made between the word of the Spirit and water baptism in several other passages about conversion. Compare John 3:5 to Mark 16:15,16; Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:35-39; 16:32,33; 18:8; Eph. 5:26.

Verses 6,7

9. What two births did Jesus contrast in v6?

Spiritual birth contrasted to physical birth.

After restating the necessity of the new birth in v5, Jesus clearly stated in v6 that He was not talking about physical birth, as Nicodemus thought. He is discussing a completely different kind of birth — a birth of the Spirit. Again, Nicodemus, not Jesus, had introduced the topic of physical birth. Jesus discussed it here only to correct the misunderstanding. The spiritual birth does not include the physical birth, but is contrasted to it. It consists of two elements: water and Spirit.

Note that Jesus refers to the physical birth as birth of the “flesh,” not of the “water.” If “water” in v5 refers to the physical birth, why did Jesus refer to it as “water” in v5 and “flesh” in v6? Why not use the same term both times?

Since Jesus was discussing a spiritual birth, not a fleshly one, then it is possible to undergo both. Nicodemus should not be amazed and confused by Jesus’ statement because, when He spoke of being “born again,” Jesus was not talking about a physical birth.

Verse 8

10. Think: Explain the meaning of v8.

The wind blows where it will.

This is a difficult verse. Calvinists and others say it means that the Spirit comes unnoticed to work on the heart of a sinner and save Him directly apart from the word. This is impossible because it contradicts such passages as the following:

Faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17).

The gospel is God’s power to save (Rom. 1:16).

We are born again by the gospel (1 Pet. 1:23).

No one can come to Jesus except by hearing, learning, and being taught (John 6:44,45).

We are brought forth (born again) by the word of truth (James 1:18).

The key to the meaning is found in the expression “hear the sound.” People cannot tell where the wind comes from and cannot control where it goes, yet they hear the sound it makes. So they cannot see or understand how the Spirit worked in revealing God’s inspired message to men. Yet they can hear the message He revealed in the word. This is how people are born again — not by direct action of the Spirit without the word, but by the medium of the word — the “sound” which they hear from the Spirit. When they hear the “sound,” they know what to do to be saved. (Cf. passages above plus Mark 16:15,16; Acts 11:14; 19:5.)

So the point is that we do not need to understand how the Spirit does His work to know that our responsibility is to listen to the message He reveals and obey it. The same principle applies to the Father and the Son in their work. We do not need to understand all about the infinite God to obey His revealed will for us. So people today are born again when they study and obey the message the Spirit reveals in the gospel.

[“Wind blows” can be translated “Spirit breathes” — ASV footnote; compare Johnson, McGarvey.]

Verses 9,10

11. How did Nicodemus show his confusion (v9), and how did Jesus respond (v10)?

Jesus rebukes Nicodemus' confusion.

Nicodemus indicated he just did not understand Jesus' point. Jesus in turn expressed dismay that one could fail to understand these things and yet claim to be a teacher of God's own people, Israel.

It is likewise amazing today that people can claim to be preachers in "Christian" denominations - even in the Lord's church - and yet fail to understand things they clearly ought to understand (1 Tim. 1:7). Amazingly, some do not even understand that Jesus was saying in this very passage that baptism is essential to salvation.

But don't be shocked. There has been such ignorance in Jesus' day and it will always be so. So we should not be surprised when people continue even today to reject the message Jesus revealed.

Verses 11-13

12. What was the source of Jesus' information, and how did people respond to it?

13. Special Assignment: List other passages showing Jesus came from heaven. Explain the significance of this claim.

Jesus realized people would misunderstand His teachings.

Jesus had spoken of things that He had personally witnessed and knew to be right, because He came down from heaven (v13). Yet the people did not accept His teachings as true. He had knowledge and authority others could not possess, yet people still questioned the truth of His statements as if they somehow knew more.

There were other things, even more difficult than these, that He could reveal in His wisdom. He had told them things pertaining to their lives and what God expects of people here. He knew enough that He could have told about heaven and what happens there (v13). But if people like Nicodemus were all confused about what He had said pertaining to how to even become a child of God, how could they possibly understand if He told them about more complicated things in heaven?

Jesus claims to have come from heaven.

Jesus had been in heaven and had descended to earth in the form of a man (see on John 1:1-18; cf. 6:38; 3:31; Phil. 2:5-8). None of the people He was teaching had ever ascended to heaven. They had no first-hand knowledge of what was there. Yet they presumed to disbelieve what was told them by the only One who had been there and come to tell them about it.

"Who is in heaven" — There are different senses in which one (especially One who possesses Deity) can be said to be in a place. In the primary sense, God's presence is in heaven (Matt. 6:9; 5:16). Yet in another sense God is everywhere, seeing and hearing all we do (Psa. 139:7-12; etc.). And in another sense He is with His people in the sense of spiritual fellowship such that He is with them and dwelling in them wherever they are (Matt. 28:20; 2 Cor. 6:16-18; John 17:20,21; etc.).

So Jesus, in personal presence, was on earth. Yet He had a unique fellowship with Father. This is expressed as being "in" one another (John 17:20,21; 8:29). In no sense were they the same individual.

The Father is personally in heaven, yet "in" Jesus and in His people as fellowship with them. So Jesus was personally on earth, but He was "in heaven" in the sense of fellowship and harmony with all that happened there. The verse may involve more than this, but surely this much is true.

And note that this is clearly a claim that Jesus was more than just a man. He claimed to have been in heaven with God and to have come down from heaven. No mere man could make such a

claim. Those who deny that Jesus believed and taught that He was Deity need to reckon with such passages as this.

Verses 14,15

14. Describe the Old Testament event mentioned in v14 and give Old Testament b/c/v for it.
15. Explain how Jesus was lifted up in a way similar to this Old Testament event.

Jesus would be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness.

The discussion then passes to other aspects of salvation and Jesus' role in it. It appears that Jesus is still talking, but it could be John is just explaining things Jesus said.

Jesus would be lifted up like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. This refers to an event recorded in Num. 21:9. The people had sinned and God sent serpents to bite and kill them. To save the people, Moses was instructed to make a serpent of brass and place it on a pole so the people could look at it and be healed.

The point of the comparison is that Jesus would also be lifted up when He died on the cross (cf. 8:28; 12:32,34). As a result, people who are suffering the guilt of sin can be healed by having their sins forgiven through Him. They can have eternal life, but to do so they must believe in Him (see notes on next verse).

Note that, once again, even very early in His public ministry, Jesus was plainly predicting His death (cf. 2:19-22). Jesus did not, as some claim, come to earth expecting to establish an earthly kingdom. He knew all along, even from the beginning of His preaching, that He must be "lifted up."

And notice further His clear claim that He would be the Savior of all men, just like the serpent was the means of salvation to the Israelites. And further, whoever believes in Him would receive eternal life! Imagine a mere human making such amazing claims, even if he were a prophet. Jesus is claiming from the beginning of His preaching, that He could save men from sin so they could receive eternal life. Who but the sinless Son of God would dare make such claims? And who can read these statements and still believe that Jesus did not know He was, not just a man, but the Divine Savior of the world?

Verse 16

16. What gift did God give to the world, and what motivated the gift? (Thought question: What need did man have that made this gift necessary?)
17. As a result, what blessing can we receive, and what must we do to receive it?
18. List 3 other passages showing what Jesus did so we can be forgiven and have eternal life.
19. Case Study: Suppose someone claims that John 3:16 shows we are saved by faith; baptism is not mentioned, so it is not necessary to salvation. How would you respond?

God's love led to the sacrifice of Jesus.

This is a beautiful summary of God's plan for saving man through Jesus. Yet many people misunderstand it.

Men ought to perish eternally because of sin (Rom. 6:23; Ezek. 18:20; 2 Thess. 1:8,9; John 8:24). Instead of eternal death, God desires to offer us eternal life (Rom. 6:23; 1 John 5:11,12; Titus 1:2; 3:7; Matt. 25:46). To make this possible, Jesus had to die on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins. Though He was innocent of sin, He was punished so we who are guilty may go free (1 Peter 2:24; Isa. 53; 2 Cor. 5:21). That God was willing to send His Son to die under these circumstances proves God's great love for us (Rom. 5:6-9; 1 John 4:9-14).

God's gift was given to offer salvation to the whole "world" — "whoever." The Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement — that Christ died just for a few who were unconditionally elected

regardless of their character, will, or conduct – is refuted in this fundamental gospel passage. But other passages likewise show that Jesus died to offer salvation to all: cf. 1 Tim. 2:4,6; 4:10; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 2:1,2; Titus 2:11-13.

People must believe to be saved.

But there are conditions each individual must meet in order to receive this salvation that God offers. Here these conditions are summarized under the term “believe” on him. Clearly each person must understand and accept the truth of God’s word about who Jesus is and what He did to save us (cf. John 8:24; Mark 16:15,16; etc.).

Some people think believing simply means having a conviction in ones heart about Jesus, and that is all that is necessary for one to be saved. In particular it is taught that obedience – outward acts of service, and especially baptism – are not necessary. Sinners are sometimes told that everything they need to know to be saved is found in this one verse and nothing else is needed. However:

(1) We must take all of God’s word and follow it all (Acts 3:22,23; Matt. 4:7; 28:20; James 2:10; John 15:14). Why was the rest of the Bible written if John 3:16 is all we need?

(2) The Bible contains express examples of people who had mental conviction about who Jesus was, but they were not saved – James 2:19; John 12:41,42.

(3) Other passages say there are other things we must do to be saved besides just have a conviction in our hearts. We must repent (Acts 17:30; 2:38; 2 Peter 3:9; Luke 24:49), confess (Rom. 10:9,10; Matt. 10:32,32), and be baptized (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16; Rom. 6:3,4; Gal. 3:26,27; 1 Peter 3:21; etc.).

(4) If people conclude that baptism is not necessary because it is not mentioned in John 3:16, then what about repentance and confession, since they also are not mentioned? And what about passages that list conditions for salvation but do not mention faith as a necessary condition – do they likewise prove that faith is not necessary to salvation? If it be argued that repentance and confession are included in believing, we ask how one can know that, since John 3:16 does not mention them. It can only be answered that other passages show they are necessary. But that proves other passages are necessary, so John 3:16 alone is not enough. You must get other details elsewhere, and whatever means you use to show that repentance and confession are necessary, the same approach will show that baptism is necessary according to other verses.

(5) The truth is that the word “faith” or “believing” is used in different ways in the Bible. There are different kinds of faith, some of which save and some of which do not. The faith that does not include obedience is faith that will not save. The faith that saves is faith that includes obedience: Heb. 10:39 & chap. 11; Gal. 5:6; James 2:14-26; Col. 2:12-14. According to the verses already listed, this includes baptism as surely as it does repentance and confession. “Believe,” as used here, is a summary term including all of man’s response to the gospel. See on 3:36 for a verse that demonstrates this connection. The details regarding what is required are spelled out elsewhere.

For further discussion of salvation by “faith only” vs. obedient faith, the purpose of baptism and the importance of obedience, see our articles on these subjects on our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

Verses 17,18

20. What was ***not*** the purpose for which Jesus came? (Thought question: In what sense was it not necessary for Him to come for that purpose?)

Jesus came to save, not to condemn.

Jesus was sent into the world by God as the means of saving the world, not of condemning the world. The world was already condemned by sin (see notes on vv 19-21; cf. Rom. 6:23; 3:23). Jesus came into the world to provide a means by which sinners could escape the condemnation brought upon themselves by their sins.

One who believes in Jesus can escape condemnation by being forgiven of sin (remember, this is obedient faith as described in v16 - see notes there). But one who does not believe stands condemned already, because he is guilty of sins; but he cannot receive the solution to sin, because that solution comes only through faith in Jesus, and he does not believe in Jesus.

One is condemned “because he does not believe,” but not in the sense that his lack of faith is what caused him to stand condemned in the first place. If someone thought that a man stood acceptable before God, but then came into a condemned state because he refused to believe in Jesus, that would mean that Jesus’ coming into the world did lead to its condemnation — the very thing this passage denies.

On the contrary, because of sin men stood condemned already, before Jesus ever came into the world. This is what the Old Testament proved repeatedly (Romans 3:19,20; Galatians 3:10,11,22). The sacrifice of Jesus is what offers forgiveness, but one must believe in order to receive forgiveness. If one does not believe, he remains in his sins, and hence stands condemned “because he does not believe.”

So each man ultimately stands condemned by his own fault. He sinned because he chose to give in to temptation – God did not make him do this – James 1:13-15. Even so, he could be saved if he would choose to respond to the gospel message and believe in Jesus. If he does not do so, he ultimately has no one to blame for his condemnation but himself. He surely cannot justifiably condemn God, who has done infinitely more to make salvation possible than man deserves.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world the *first* time He came – i.e., when He came born of the virgin Mary. That time He came so He could die to become our Savior. But He will come a second time, and that time He will be our judge and will condemn the world and all unforgiven sinners to eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46).

Verses 19-21

21. Why do some men hate light (truth), but other men love it?

22. Application: Give some examples that illustrate the principle of vv 19-21

Men are condemned because they prefer darkness to light.

Again, as in vv 17,18, men are condemned, but the condemnation is caused by their sinful deeds — they are practicing evil (see also v20). They stay in condemnation because, even though Jesus brought light (truth and salvation — 1:4; 8:12; etc.) into the world, yet the men prefer to stay in darkness. They do not come to Jesus the light to have their sins removed.

Sin hates the light.

People who are practicing sin do not want to come to the light (usually) because they don’t like to have their sins exposed or revealed. When people are in sin and are not willing to change and do what is right, they become uncomfortable when their sinful deeds are exposed. Some commit sins in private, because they don’t want anyone to even know what they are doing. Others don’t mind having people know what they do, so long as those people act as though the conduct is acceptable, rather than rebuking it. In any case, people don’t want to have it made clear that they are guilty of sin and that their sins are as repulsive and evil as the Bible says they are.

This is a general statement of truth. Of course, other Scriptures show that there are some sinners who hate their sins and want to learn the solution to their sins. They are glad to come to the light, so they can be forgiven. And there are sincere people, who are in sin but do not realize it. They are willing to come to the light, not realizing that it will rebuke them. But if they are truly committed to what is right, they will repent when they learn the truth. Otherwise, they will no longer want to come to the light, as the passage describes.

On the other hand, a person who is doing right does not mind hearing what the Bible says about right and wrong, because he knows he is doing what pleases God. He has nothing to fear from examination of God’s word, because the word does not condemn him. And if he should find

that he is wrong on some point, he is still glad to have heard what the word says because now he can correct himself.

Examples of people who hate the light

This explains many things that sinful people do. Most are “not interested” in coming to church meetings, nor will they participate in a home Bible study. They “don’t want to talk about religion,” because they are afraid their sins will be exposed. Many of them don’t even want to be around Christians, especially those known for zealously speaking about the gospel. Some even persecute Christians and try to get them to quit preaching the truth, because the preaching condemns sin and the people don’t want to hear it. This also explains why many members of the church quit attending when they become involved in sin — they are too embarrassed to come to services and hear their sins rebuked.

Likewise, many religious people are willing to talk about religion, until they begin to see that Bible passages are being produced that condemn their own practices. Then they say things like, “I don’t believe in debating,” or “I don’t think it’s Christ-like to criticize other people’s beliefs.” In many cases they did not mind debating or criticizing until they were proved to be in error. In any case, the fear that they or their loved ones will be proved wrong is generally what leads people to be unwilling to discuss religion.

But truth has nothing to fear from investigation. So an honest person, who has the truth or sincerely wants the truth, will be willing to participate in fair and honest discussions of God’s word.

Further Testimony from John the Baptist — 3:22-36

Verses 22-24

23. Where was John the Baptist baptizing now, and why was he there? (Note: locate on a map.)
24. Special Assignment: What lesson can we learn from v23 about the action of baptism?

Jesus baptizes in Judea.

Sometime after his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus came into the land of Judea with His disciples. He stayed there a while baptizing people (though we learn later that it was actually Jesus’ disciples, not Jesus Himself, who personally did the baptizing — 4:2).

We are not told the purpose of Jesus’ baptizing people at this time, except that it had to do with making disciples (4:1). The baptism evidently dedicated them to be His disciples. We are not told whether or not it was for the remission of sins. Nor do we know whether or not these people had to be re-baptized after His resurrection. We do not need this information, since we cannot receive this baptism anyway. It was clearly not a baptism into Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, as is the baptism of the gospel (Rom. 6:3,4; Col. 2:12). Other passages tell us what we need to know about the baptism that we need to receive today — that is what is important to us. But we do not need to understand all about this baptism that Jesus practiced, so the details are not revealed.

John’s baptism required much water.

John was also baptizing at this time in a place called Aenon near Salim. The exact location of this place is uncertain (consult a Bible dictionary or Bible atlas). Just as there are unrevealed details about the baptism Jesus performed, so there are questions we have difficulty answering about John’s baptism, since it too is no longer being practiced (cf. Acts 19:1ff).

But we are given information that helps us understand the physical action involved in baptism. We are told that John chose the place he did “because there was much water there.” If baptism is a sprinkling or pouring, as many believe, why would John need “much water,” and why deliberately choose the place he did so he would have “much water” available? Sprinkling and

pouring do not require much water at all. But immersion requires “much water.” This helps confirm what we learn from other passages and from the original meaning of the word “baptize.” Baptism is an immersion, not a sprinkling or pouring (see Rom. 6:3,4; Col. 2:12; Acts 8:36-39; Mark 1:9,10).

At this point, John had not yet been imprisoned. Later he was imprisoned by Herod and eventually beheaded (Matt. 14:1ff).

For a detailed discussion about the action of baptism – sprinkling, pouring, or immersion - see our article about this on our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

Verses 25,26

25. What problem did John’s disciples have about Jesus (v26)?

John’s disciples question him about Jesus’ popularity.

John’s disciples then had a disputation with some Jews about purification. We are not told exactly what the dispute was about because, again, we do not need to know the specifics. The writer is telling the story simply to bring out John the Baptist’s further testimony about Jesus. It is likely that the discussion of purification was related to the purpose of baptism. Both John and Jesus were baptizing people, so the discussion of purification led to a question about Jesus’ baptizing people.

Chapter 1 contains a lengthy record about John’s testimony regarding Jesus (see notes on 1:19-36). John’s disciples remembered that discussion and realized that Jesus was the one about whom John had testified when he was beyond the Jordan. But they now said that Jesus was baptizing people too, and many people (they exaggerate saying “all”) were coming to Him to be baptized. 4:1 adds that Jesus was making more disciples than John was. Apparently, these disciples were concerned for John’s sake, probably even jealous that John was losing disciples to Jesus.

Verses 27,28

26. Thought question: What does v27 mean?

27. What did John remind his disciples in v28 that he had previously taught? Give **b/c/v** where he taught this.

John repeats his testimony regarding Jesus.

John responded by repeating His testimony about Jesus, showing his own secondary position, and reminding the disciples that this is the way he had described it from the beginning. He had denied being the Christ (1:20), but said he had been sent before Jesus to prepare the way for Him. Why then should he object if Jesus was making disciples. And if they were truly John’s disciples, they should have believed what he told them, in which case they should not object if Jesus made disciples.

John said a man can truly receive nothing unless it is given to Him from heaven. Obviously he is referring to ministry in service to God. A true ministry must come from God in order to be valid. (A person can, of course, **claim** to have something, even though God never really gave it. But despite the claim, he does not really **have** it.)

The application here is to both Jesus and John. John had what God had given him; he received nothing more and should claim nothing more. He can receive nothing unless God gave it. God gave John a limited ministry: to prepare the way for Jesus. So He should not attempt to take for himself something that God never intended to give him. On the other hand, Jesus had what was also given by God; so no one should attempt to deny it or take away from it. The application is that, what was happening was exactly what God willed and what John had said would happen. So his disciples should not have been upset or jealous.

Verses 29,30

28. Explain John's parable in v29.

29. Case Study: Some people today say they are members of the church begun by John the Baptist and wearing His name. What application can be made to such people from the teaching of John himself?

The illustration of the bridegroom

John used a simple illustration of his point. The one who marries the bride in a wedding ceremony is the bridegroom. The bride does not belong to the groom's best man nor to any of his friends. The friends all have positions that are secondary to that of the groom. Should the friends be jealous because of that? Not if they really care for the groom. A true friend of the groom rejoices because of the joy of his friend. His joy is fulfilled in seeing his friend blessed. To do otherwise would be selfish and self-centered. It would be an attempt to take what did not rightfully belong to oneself.

John was saying that, in the same way, he rejoiced in Jesus' success. This was actually the purpose of his work — to increase Jesus' acceptance and to encourage people to follow Him. He was not sad but happy when people followed Jesus, because this showed that his own mission was being fulfilled. His following would decrease while that of Jesus would increase. This is the way God wanted it to be, so it was the way John wanted it to be.

Note that today there are some people who, like these disciples of John, want to cling to the name of John the Baptist, claim to receive the baptism he administered, and/or claim they are members of the church he began. They need to realize that they are seeking a greater preeminence for John than God intended or than John himself intended.

Such people may claim they are also disciples of Jesus; but if they understood John's purpose, they would instead name themselves after the One John prepared the way for and seek to be members of His church. John sought to honor Jesus, not himself. Why settle for identifying yourself with the forerunner? Why not identify instead with the One who is the Savior and the One who had the preeminence? Why seek to be part of a group which, by the statement of the leader himself, is supposed to dwindle? Why not rather identify yourself as a follower and member of the church belonging to the One whose following John himself tried to increase?

Verses 31-33

30. Who came from heaven? What is His position (v31)? (Think: To whom does this refer?)

31. What reception did people in general give His testimony (v32)?

32. When people did receive His testimony, what did that demonstrate (v33)? Explain.

Further information is given here about Jesus' work, and especially about His authority and why we should believe in Him. It is unclear to me who is speaking here. The NKJV translators appear to believe it is still John the Baptist, so they continue the quotation marks as in the previous verses. However, it seems just as likely that these are the author John's inspired comments on the story. In either case, of course, the message is inspired truth from God.

He who comes from above

People who are from the earth can only speak about things they have learned on earth - earthly knowledge. We cannot speak with assurance about things in heaven, since we have never been there. We have seen only the earth, so that is all we can testify about. But One who had been in heaven could testify with authority about what is there. Only Jesus can do that.

Because He is from heaven, Jesus is "above all." This coincides with John 1:1, etc. He was God from the beginning, the Creator, etc. He has authority over all — i.e., over all created things. Jesus rules over all by right of ownership. He owns all by right of being Creator of all. See also

Matthew 28:18; Philippians 3:20,21; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 17:14; 19:16; John 3:31; Romans 9:5; Acts 10:36; Romans 10:12; Philippians 2:9-11; Ephesians 1:21; John 16:15; 17:10.

Being from heaven, Jesus can testify with authority about heaven and what the will of the Father is (see v13). Yet despite this authority, people in general did not accept His testimony as true. No one else can speak with first-hand experience about heaven, yet people reject the testimony of the only one who can speak with authority! (Note the verse says “no one” receives His testimony, but this is an obvious hyperbole – the very next verse speaks of those who did receive Him.)

If however, a person does accept and believe Jesus’ testimony to be true, then that person is putting his seal, certification, or stamp of approval on God’s promises as being true (cf. certify or “seal” in John 6:27; Romans 4:11; 15:28; 1 Corinthians 9:2; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13). To disbelieve is to claim that Jesus’ statements are not true or not from God. To believe them is to confess or confirm that they are from God. This, of course, requires us to respond by obedience.

Verses 34,35

33. What is the relationship between the Father and the Son (vv 34,35)? (Thought question: What is meant by “He gives not the Spirit by measure”?)

Jesus speaks for God by the power of the Spirit.

Jesus, being from heaven sent from God, being over all, and Himself possessing Deity, speaks the words of God. That is why men ought to hear His words. Here is another clear affirmation by John that Jesus was from God and spoke for God – see on 1:17,18.

Another reason Jesus had the right to speak God’s words is that He did not have the Spirit by measure — i.e., He had it without measure. When He spoke God’s word, He spoke from personal knowledge, He spoke with authority because He is over all, and He spoke with measureless guidance from the Holy Spirit. Hence, all He said must be true and ought to be accepted.

It is not completely clear in what sense Jesus was guided by the Spirit. Apostles and prophets were guided by the Holy Spirit, because they would have no other way of directly knowing God’s will. But their knowledge was limited to whatever the Spirit chose to reveal. Jesus had unlimited guidance of the Spirit; but since He was from heaven, why would He need it? Obviously, the Beings of Deity are always able to communicate with one another without limitation, so perhaps this was just a way of expressing the fact that Jesus on earth had unlimited communication with the Spirit. But the relationship among unlimited, infinite Beings must also remain to some extent beyond human ability to understand.

Further, the Son was able to speak God’s word authoritatively, because the Father has put all things in His hand (Matt. 28:18). Jesus is not a mere man or on a level with any man. The Father has exalted Him to a position such that everything is in His power. So clearly we must believe and respect the authority of all that He says as being the Word of God. See under v31 for other references showing the exalted position of Jesus over all.

The point is surely that Jesus is so great – so much greater even than John the Baptist – that we must surely not begrudge the honor and following He receives (as some of John’s followers were doing – v26). But it appears that the author uses this as an opportunity to discuss in general Jesus’ greatness and His exalted position. He has all authority, is over all, and so must be believed and obeyed. This is the exact application made in the next verse.

Verse 36

34. What is the consequence of believing or not believing (v36)?
35. List other passages that show whether or not a child of God can so sin as to fall from grace or be eternally lost.
36. Case Study: Some people claim that v36 proves one who believes “has everlasting life.” If we “have” it, then we can never be lost. How would you respond?

Faith leads to eternal life, unbelief leads to wrath.

Since Jesus speaks for God as in vv 31-35, faith in Jesus is essential to please God. We must believe He is all that the Bible claims Him to be, and we must believe His message and accept it as absolute truth.

If we have this faith, we have everlasting life. But if we do not believe (or do not obey — ASV), we will not see life but will abide under the wrath of God. Like v16, this confirms the absolute necessity of faith to please God (see on v16 and cf. Heb. 11:6; John 8:24; Mark 16:16; Rom. 10:9,10; etc.). Again, the faith here is comprehensive, saving faith, and that includes obedience (see notes on v16). Interestingly, the ASV even translates this verse in such a way as to demonstrate the true faith includes and requires obedience, exactly as we have explained on v16.

This is both a great promise and a great warning. There is a great blessing to those who choose to believe and a great warning to those who do not.

Does this teach “once saved, always saved”?

Some say we “have” eternal life because we believe, but if we already “have” it, then we cannot be lost. Therefore “once saved, always saved” - one who has believed can never afterwards become lost. But we “have” everlasting life now in the sense of a conditional promise or hope, not as an immutable possession (see 1 John 2:25; James 1:12; Titus 1:2; 3:7; 1 Peter 1:3,4; etc.). We receive eternal life as an actual possession only after this life is over (Luke 18:30; Rom. 2:5-7; Rev. 2:10).

Furthermore, the verse itself states a condition one must meet to have eternal life — he must believe. But it is possible for the believer to cease believing and become an unbeliever (Heb. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 5:8). If a believer ceases to believe, will he still be saved? The last part of this verse itself answers: it says the unbeliever does not have life but will receive God’s wrath. Hence, the passage itself shows that conditions must be met for one to receive eternal life in the judgment, and that one will be lost if he ceases meeting the conditions.

Further, if the first part of the verse teaches “once saved, always saved,” why doesn’t the last part teach “once lost, always lost”? It says the one who does not believe will not see life but abides under God’s wrath. If the first part is immutable and unconditional, why not also the last part? Hence, anyone who ever disbelieves is lost and can never be saved! On the other hand, if the state of the unbeliever in the last part of the verse can change by becoming a believer, then in the same way the state of the believer in the first part of the verse will change if he ceases to believe. And remember that believing here includes obedience.

Finally, there are many other verses that show a saved person can so sin as to become lost. Verses like v36 should never be so viewed as to contradict other verses that plainly teach that a child of God may so sin as to be lost. See John 15:1-6; Acts 8:12-24; Romans 6:12-18; 8:12-17; Galatians 5:1-4; 6:7-9; 1 Corinthians 9:25-10:12; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 5:8; 2 Timothy 2:16-18; Hebrews 3:6,11-14; 4:9,11; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 2 Peter 1:8-11; 2:20-22.

For further discussion of the security of the believer and “once saved, always saved,” see our articles on this subject on our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

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