

His Great Love - radio

(John 3:1-16)

Introduction

In John 3, we see the work of God in the salvation of His people. We see the sinfulness of the best of men. We see the ignorance of the best of men. We see the pride and unbelief that is in the best of men. And we see the utter helplessness of the best of men. And then we see the sovereign, saving, power of God, that sprang out of His eternal love, in the obedient life and the sin-atoning death of the Son of God. We see that God's people are not limited to one nation or one race or one culture. God has a people and will save them. Christ was crucified and has redeemed His people out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation.

“Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

All those God loves, He gave His Son to redeem. All those Christ redeemed, He gives His Spirit to raise to life, to be born into His kingdom. And all who are born of God, believe that Christ accomplished all of their salvation when He cried from the cross, “It is finished!” All who are born of God believe Christ as Lord of all, and trust Him as their only and complete Answer to God, by His sin-atoning death, by His obedient life and by His rule in heaven where He intercedes with His own blood to save them to the uttermost.

This is the summary of what is taught in chapter John 3. But throughout time, men have twisted this chapter to say what it does not teach. Here is what this chapter does not teach:

- Men are not born again because they believe or because they repent. Rather, men are turned from their unbelief to believe Christ crucified as all of their salvation when they are born again. Faith in Christ is not the cause of our spiritual birth; it is the effect of it, the result produced by it.

- There is no recipe, no process that men follow, no steps that men take to become born again. This is the work of God alone, from beginning to end. God's love, God's will, Christ's justifying obedience and sin-atonement death, and the resurrecting, life-giving sovereign power of the Spirit of God are without man's contribution. Man is the recipient only. The motive springs from God's heart, not man's. The ground of all love and acceptance and blessing is Christ, by His sin-atonement death. Life comes by the Spirit of God, and He commands that life when He takes the Gospel of Christ crucified, and applies it with saving, life-giving power to those who are dead in their sins, living as the devil's children, blind and utterly hopeless and helpless in themselves (Eph. 2:1-6).
- Men are not saved by their decision, but by God's decision (James 1:18).
- Men are not justified by their work, nor are they justified because of their faith, but because of Christ's work alone (Heb. 1:3).
- Men are not created in Christ and raised from death to life and born as sons of God into the kingdom of His dear Son, but by the operation of the Spirit of God when He uses Christ's Gospel to speak life to their souls.
- We are not saved because we respond to God. We are saved because God determines to save, Christ actually did save (Matt. 1:21), and the Spirit of God, in response to Christ's cleansing work of atonement, and by His sovereign rule in glory, gives life to dead sinners (Gal. 4:6).
- Faith in Christ is not a decision, and it is not what causes God to justify sinners or to give them life. Faith is God's gift by which we are enabled to see what Christ has done and who He is. Faith is God's persuasion to the sinner that Christ is all to God and all to us. Faith is implanted by the operation of the Spirit of God who causes us to look to Christ and live upon Christ in glad reception for pardon and peace and joy, which we experience in believing that Christ is all in all that God required and demanded from us (Rom. 15:13; 1 Cor. 1:30).
- Therefore, the new birth stands to both testify what God must do, and what we cannot do, or cause to happen. The new birth is what God does because Christ made us holy before Him by His shedding His blood to put away our sins and establish our everlasting righteousness in His death (Heb. 10:1-18).

The new birth prevents sinners from boasting in their contribution. If we think or say that we responded to God by our decision or by accepting Jesus or by asking God to save us, and therefore we are born of God, then we do not understand the new birth. We must understand that this is God's work alone to remove all boasting and point us to Christ, that we might only boast in His eternal achievements for sinners.

Exposition

“1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:1-2).

- Nicodemus was among those that saw Jesus' miracles, but believed in Him only as a miracle-worker (John 2:23-25).
- Though Christ did not commit Himself to those who only saw and believed Him as a miracle-worker, yet He did, in great grace, receive Nicodemus though a sinner. He did reveal Himself and His saving to him. Indeed, Christ revealed to Nicodemus the whole saving work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit to Nicodemus in this chapter of John!
- But Nicodemus trusted his birth to Abraham. He trusted his understanding. He believed he could make himself acceptable to God. He believed that he was part of the kingdom of God, because he believed the nation of Israel and its king was that kingdom.
- Nicodemus calls Jesus “Rabbi” and “a teacher come from God.” But that is as far as he went. His faint praise reveals his ignorance and pride. He had high thoughts of himself. He had low thoughts of Christ. He was blind to his own sin. He was blind to who Jesus is and blind to His saving work. Nicodemus did not know that Christ is King in God's kingdom. He did not know that God's kingdom is in heaven. He did not know that God's kingdom is in the hearts of all those who are in that kingdom. *“The kingdom of God is within you”* (Luke 17:21). He did not know that the throne of the kingdom of God is the throne of heaven. He did not know that the people of

the kingdom of God were not limited to the Jews, but were those for whom Christ shed His blood to redeem out of every kindred, tongue, people and nation throughout the world (Rev. 5:9).

Therefore, Jesus strikes at the heart of Nicodemus' pride and ignorance, and at the same time, He opens the first work of God in the heart of sinners.

“3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Jesus told Nicodemus he had not seen and could not see the kingdom of God unless he was born again. He must be born again to see God's kingdom.

But Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant. Can you blame him? We have had over two thousand years to understand the new birth. Can you explain it? Books have been written about how to be born again. Yet the very title of those books prove that those authors do not understand the new birth. Nicodemus could think only of physical birth. So in response, Nicodemus asked Jesus,

4 ...How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born” (John 3:4)?

Having made known Nicodemus' ignorance of spiritual things, Jesus proceeds to declare the truth of the new birth and the requirement of the new birth.

“5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5-6).

- Much to his surprise, Jesus told Nicodemus that a man must be born again, not in physical re-birth, but he must be spiritually born.
- Our first birth is physical. All men are physically born. We see and enter the physical world by physical conception and birth. In the same way, we must be spiritually born to see and enter the kingdom of God.

- Again, the kingdom of God is the life and rule of Christ in the hearts of His people by His Spirit. It is Christ reigning as King in us, and Christ reigning in heaven as King of Glory.
- Jesus said a man must be born of “water” and the “Spirit.” He was talking about spiritual things. Spiritual birth is accomplished only by spiritual things, just as physical birth is accomplished only by physical things. Therefore, the “water” refers to the word of God. Jesus said, “*The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit and they are life*” (John 6:63). The Apostle James said, “Of His own will begat He us **by the word of God**” (James 1:18). And the Apostle Peter said, “*Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, **by the word of God***” (1 Pet. 1:23). Jesus was not talking about words as mere words only, but the *doctrine of the Gospel* that the word of God teaches. Therefore, the apostle Paul said, “*the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation*” (Rom. 1:16), because the Gospel is the doctrine of Christ’s blood, shed to make atonement to God and cleanse His people from their sins before the LORD (1 John 1:7; Lev. 16:30; Heb. 1:3). Therefore, the “water” is the Gospel, which is the message of the word of God, that tells of Christ’s work to save His people by washing them from their sins before God with His own blood (1 John 1:7; Heb. 9:22) and in their conscience .
- A man must be born of “*water and of the Spirit.*” When the Spirit of God applies the Gospel to the conscience of a sinner, that sinner is born of God (Heb. 9:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:18-25). A man must be born of water and of the Spirit. The Spirit of God commands life when He takes the doctrine of the Gospel of Christ’s redeeming blood, and makes it the only confidence and hope of a sinner. Just as God spoke and all things were created out of nothing, the Spirit of God speaks the Gospel where there is spiritual nothingness in the heart of a man, and creates a new spirit in that man. He sprinkles the clean water of the Gospel of Christ’s blood on his conscience, giving him faith to see, faith as a persuasion, that the truth of Christ’s finished work on the cross is the whole truth about the way things are between me and God. That Gospel applied by the Spirit of God, according to

Jesus, is life. *“The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit and they are life”* (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:10-12).

Nicodemus must have stood amazed at what Jesus said, because Jesus continues, *“7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. 8 The wind bloweth where it listeth (pleases), and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit”* (John 3:7-8).

- We must not let our surprise of the truth stand between us and believing the truth. We must know that we cannot see until God gives us sight. We cannot live until God gives us life. We cannot believe until God gives us faith.
- Jesus makes it clear that this is all God’s work (Acts 3:16; 5:31; 13:48; 18:27; 26:18; Eph. 2:1-10; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23; Rom. 12:3; Heb. 12:2; 2 Thess. 3:2; Titus 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:2; John 6:29; Rom. 11:32-36). Just as the wind blows without man initiating it and without man directing it and without man impeding Him or controlling it, so the Spirit of God gives life, spiritual life, without man initiating Him, without man directing Him, without man stopping Him, and without man controlling Him. It is all of God. Everyone that is ever born of God will be born this way. Jesus said, *“So is everyone that is born of the Spirit,”* the Spirit of God.

“9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be” (John 3:9)?

- Here we have a pause in Jesus’ sermon to Nicodemus. We are allowed to draw a conclusion here. Nicodemus was the best that men could produce. He was born to Abraham, he knew the law and thought he kept it, he was religious, men recognized him as a master in Israel. By all accounts, he was the best of the best that man can produce. But here, the Spirit of God records his words to show that he was completely ignorant of spiritual things. He could not see the kingdom of God. He had not entered it. He did not understand the new birth. He did not understand the kingdom of God. He did not know God’s King. He did not know the people of that kingdom. He was proud, ignorant, and most of all, helpless, unable to contribute one thing. He was utterly dependent on the work of God.

- Until we are brought to see this, we are also ignorant and proud. We do not yet know spiritual things, because spiritual things are spiritually discerned, and only the Spirit of God can reveal them to us. *“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”* (1 Cor. 2:14).

“10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things” (John 3:10)?

- Jesus says this both for us and for Nicodemus. For us, to teach us that Nicodemus, though recognized as great among men, was yet entirely in the dark, ignorant and spiritually blind.
- But Jesus also said this to humble Nicodemus. We also must be humbled before we will believe. We must realize that we don’t know, before we will be persuaded and believe the truth.

Jesus continues...

“11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that (what) we do know, and testify that (what) we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things” (John 3:10-11).

- Jesus now shows that Nicodemus is a willful unbeliever. He does not yet believe. He has refused the truth he heard. Our Lord is convincing him that he is a sinner, and that his sin is unbelief (John 16:8-11).
- Jesus said, *“If I have told you earthly things and you believe not, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?!”* What were those earthly things Jesus told Nicodemus? Well, Christ had told him about the new birth. He had compared it to physical birth. He had told him about wind to teach him about the Spirit of God. He had told him about water to teach him about the Gospel of Christ’s cleansing blood (Zech. 13:1; 1 John 1:7). But more generally, the earthly things included everything God had given in the law that pointed to Christ. And now, the Lord Jesus brings Nicodemus’ attention to another earthly thing from the OT to hold it up to him as the object of all saving faith. This is very important! Christ is going to hold up to Nicodemus the Gospel in picture and explain that picture, and it will be by this that the

Spirit of God gives life to Nicodemus. This is how God (not man) gives life and birth and faith to every sinner that He saves!

- Jesus had told the Pharisees the truth about Himself. John the Baptist had also told them. The problem was not that they had not heard. The problem was that they had not believed. They rejected the truth. They refused to submit to the righteousness of God. Christ crucified is the righteousness of God. He is the only One who fulfilled God's law, and therefore, His is the only righteousness that there is (Ps. 71:16; Jer. 23:6; Rom. 10:4; Php. 2:8; 2 Cor. 5:21)!
- And Jesus continues, to first reveal who He is to Nicodemus...

“13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” (John 3:13).

- Nicodemus thought Messiah would be David's son, a mere man. He thought David's son would sit as king in the kingdom of God on earth. But Jesus, in Matthew 16, told His disciples that He Himself is the Son of Man and the Son of God. Jesus asked them, *“Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?”* Peter answered, *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt. 16:13-17). All whom the Lord saves believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man (John 20:31).
- To *“ascend up”* means more than to merely go up. It means to be seated in the place of unlimited authority, with the glory of God. God promised to raise Christ, David's son and David's Lord, to sit on heaven's throne (Ps. 110:1; 132:11; Acts 2:32-33). But Christ would not be seated on that throne as Son of Man until He first came into the world. Before His coronation, He must come in humiliation and fulfill the will of God (Heb. 2:9).
- Therefore, Jesus says to Nicodemus, *“No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven”* (John 3:13). In a few short words, the Lord Jesus describes who He is and His saving work.
- He is the eternal Son of God, who from eternity has been with the Father. But He is also the Son of Man, who from eternity was chosen and appointed as God's Christ. From eternity, God the Father chose His only begotten Son

to take into union with Himself the nature of man. He would be God's Christ. He would be the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). He would save His people from their sins. Therefore, from eternity, in His decree, God set up Christ as Son of Man, and as Son of Man, He had glory with the Father before He came into the world. "*What and if you shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before*" (John 6:62)? Jesus tells Nicodemus that He had glory with the Father before He came into the world (John 17:5), that He descended in voluntary humiliation as a Servant to do the will of God in His death, and that He would rise from the dead and ascend to heaven's throne as King of Glory, as Son of Man. In short, Jesus makes known to Nicodemus who He is, and...

- He explains what He would do: His saving work. He explains what He would do as Son of Man in His humiliation before He would be exalted to heaven's throne. He must first go to the cross. He must destroy the works of the devil. And He must put away the sins of His people (Heb. 1:3; 1 John 3:8). That is what He means by what He says in the next verse.

"14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

- Here is the "earthly thing" that Nicodemus had heard but had not believed.
- In Numbers 21:4-9, the children of Israel spoke against God and Moses. They said that they hated the manna that God gave them from heaven. This is very important. Jesus describes what these people were like before God lifted up that serpent in the wilderness. They were sinners. They had sinned before. And they would sin again. They did not believe God. They accused God of evil intent, that He brought them out of Egypt and led them into the wilderness to kill them, not to bring them into the land of promise and rest. And they spoke against Moses. Now, this was all recorded so that we can see that we are just like them. By nature, we do not believe. Those people hated the manna. But that manna pointed to Christ crucified, the Bread of Life, who was sent from God!

- Many things are accomplished by this account. First, Jesus further humbled Nicodemus. He shows that He not only could not see and had not entered the kingdom of God, but that He refused to believe God, that he refused to believe Moses and refused Christ. Nicodemus must take his place with those God sent serpents to bite!
- The serpent was God's plague against the people. They were cursed because of their sin. Many died from that curse. And while many others were dying, God did something. And by this, God what He did to save His people from their sins by the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Jesus said that He, the Son of Man, would be lifted up as that serpent was lifted up (John 12:32). The serpent was the curse against the people (Gal. 3:13). Christ must therefore be cursed to save His people from the curse they deserved. He was to be lifted up on the cross, as the serpent was lifted up on the pole. Moses lifted that serpent. God's law would curse Christ. God commanded Moses to lift up that serpent for the life of those cursed sinners. God determined to crucify His Son to save His cursed people, who are sinners, under the wrath of God. "*Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us*" (Gal. 3:13). Christ was cursed by God to remove God's curse from His people. Their sins were made His, and He bore them as His own. "*He hath made Him [to be] sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him*" (2 Cor. 5:21).
- Thus, Jesus explains the Gospel to Nicodemus. Christ was made sin. The sins of His people were made His. He was guilty of them. And therefore He bore the curse for them. He satisfied God's justice and fulfilled God's law by His voluntary obedience in the humiliation of His sufferings and death. It was all done by God. We had nothing to do with it, nothing contribute to it. Christ did it all. God crucified His Son out of His sovereign love for His people. God delivered up His Son for them, and with Him, He shall give them all things (Rom. 8:32).
- All for whom Christ died are redeemed from the curse they deserved. Because they are redeemed, God sends His Spirit to give them life (Gal. 3:13-14; 4:4-6; Eph. 1:4-7). This is what Jesus meant when He said, "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be*

lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

- All that Christ came to do, He did as the **Substitute** for His people, as **their representative**, to live and die in their place, so that God would look upon Him and receive from Him all that He requires from them.
- God set Him up from eternity as Son of Man to fulfill this, and when He cried from the cross, *“It is finished!”*, He made full atonement and obtained eternal redemption and cleansed His people before the LORD from all of their sins for all of eternity (Heb. 9:12; 10:14)!
- And here, the mystery of the new birth is unfolded. All who believe, who look to Christ as all of their salvation, as those who were dying in the wilderness looked upon that serpent on the pole, all they are born of God. They are not born because they believe, but they believe because they are born.
- Our faith is the result of God’s work. It is His gift. We contribute nothing to our birth, nothing to our resurrection from the dead, nothing to our creation in Christ (Eph. 2:1-10; Acts 18:27; 13:48). We contributed nothing to Christ atoning work. We can never earn the love of God (Song 8:7). All is of God by His sovereign grace in Christ! But the faith given to us enables us to receive this salvation in our understanding, in persuasion and in glad bracing and willing reception, of the work of God for us in Christ. If you believe Christ, you are born of God and loved of God. If you do not believe Christ, you are not yet born of God. God only loves those for whom He gave His Son. The Spirit of God gives spiritual birth to all those for whom Christ died. The evidence is that they are born of God is that er believe Christ crucified as all of our acceptance before God, all of our righteousness, all of the cleansing for all of our sins!

Almost all who call themselves Christians today believe that God loves everyone in the whole world, and that Jesus died for everyone in all the world. But this is not truth. God’s love is holy. He only loves those in Christ, those He chose in Christ in love from eternity (Eph. 1:4). His love is saving. He will save all whom He loves. *“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zep.*

3:17). God's love is everlasting. It has no beginning (Jer. 31:3; Ps. 90:2; 1 John 4:16) and it has no end (Rom. 8:39; John 13:1). God's love is undeserved and unailing. *"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned"* (Song 8:7). For those He loves, God gave His Son to bear their sins and the curse of His law by His sufferings and death on the cross (Rom. 8:32). If He did that, then He will, without fail, give them all things with Christ. *"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things"* (Rom. 8:32)? Nothing can separate one of God's elect sheep from His love. *"I am persuaded, that neither death (ours -- Eph. 2:1-4), nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 8:39). If you believe that God loves all people alike, and that Jesus died for the sins of all people, then you do not understand either the love of God or the death and the merits of God's dear Son. None for whom Christ died can perish in their sins. All whom God loves in Christ shall be everlastingly saved. He will rejoice over them with singing. He will rest in His love.