

Chapter 6: The New Birth of Jesus

John 3:1–21

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 is a crucial moment in this Gospel for several reasons. First, this is the very first time in the Gospel of John that we find Jesus engaged in extended teaching where *he* explains his own life and ministry. Up to this point, we have seen *other* people teach about Jesus, and we have seen Jesus performing *signs*, but Jesus himself has spoken very little to explain who he is or what he is trying to accomplish. This conversation kicks off extended discourses that will run through the rest of the Gospel of John.

Second, we find a different kind of interaction with Nicodemus than we have seen so far in either the disciples (who believed in Jesus almost immediately) or in the Jews who opposed him during the Passover Feast—or even in those who *think* they believe in Jesus, but do not. Here we have a man who honestly does not know what to make of Jesus, which is why he seeks out Jesus to talk further. This man is a true seeker, trying to learn what he can about Jesus after recognizing something significant that he cannot easily explain.

Third, this text in many ways provides us a key to understanding the purpose behind the entire Gospel of John. Jesus has come to give the new birth through the Holy Spirit (John 3:3–8). Jesus must eventually be lifted up to give life to those who look upon him in faith (John 3:14–15). Jesus has come because his Father loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to give the world eternal life (John 3:16). Jesus will either be embraced or rejected based on the condition of the hearts of each individual who comes in contact with his light (John 3:18–21). In order to understand how all of these themes will play out through the rest of the Gospel of John, we must first grapple with exactly what Jesus means when he teaches these things here in John 3:1–21.

“You must be born again” (John 3:1–8)

The way that we interpret the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus depends on how we understand the connection between John 2:23–25 and John 3:1. Read together, it sounds at first as though the Evangelist is identifying Nicodemus as one of those who “believed in [Jesus’] name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:23–25). Importantly, Nicodemus will acknowledge the “signs” (John 3:2) that Jesus has been doing, and John also introduces Nicodemus as “a man of the Pharisees” (John 3:1), where “man” connects back with John 2:25: “he himself knew what was in *man*.” In some way, the conversation in John 3 “is a continuation of the preceding paragraph.”

Furthermore, we should recognize that Nicodemus comes to Jesus “by night” (John 3:2), and whenever John tells us that something happens during the night in his Gospel (John 3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30), he uses the image of nighttime “metaphorically for moral and spiritual darkness.” Should we,

then, understand the moral and spiritual darkness of Nicodemus along the lines of the nighttime in which the wicked, unrepentant Judas worked (John 13:30)? In other words, is Nicodemus a man who rides the Jesus bandwagon for a while because of the signs he sees Jesus performing, but then ultimately betrays the Lord? Some believe this, arguing that Nicodemus is one of those with a “vain and fleeting...faith...who, having been excited by miracles, suddenly professed to be the disciples of Christ.”³ Is that the whole story with Nicodemus?

While it is difficult to ascertain exactly where Nicodemus is spiritually during this encounter, the story of Nicodemus is thankfully a much more positive story than that of Judas. In some ways, the story of Nicodemus is actually the *inverse* of Judas’s. Nicodemus, as we will see, begins in darkness, but ultimately becomes a cautious advocate for Jesus (John 7:50–51), and then a full-fledged disciple of Jesus by the time of Christ’s crucifixion, helping Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus’ body for burial (John 19:39). Unlike Judas, who begins strongly, but then betrays Jesus in the end, the faith of Nicodemus grows from curiosity here in John 3 all the way to the kind of faith that discerns the glory of Jesus in his crucifixion in John 19. Even here in John 3:1, John gives us a hint toward the future faith of Nicodemus, which is unfortunately obscured by our English translations that use the word “Now” to transition into this story: “*Now* there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus...” (John 3:1). The word “Now” suggests that the story of John 3 stands in direct *continuity* with the preceding paragraph, when in fact the Greek word *de* more often suggests *discontinuity* (“But”) with what has come before it, meaning that “in contrast to those with inadequate faith at the end of ch. 2, Nicodemus’ approach was not so faulty and Jesus did entrust himself to him.”⁴

As we will see, this does not mean that Nicodemus yet believes; however, this observation clarifies that Nicodemus is not deceived about his faith. Nicodemus is a marvelous example in Scripture of a true seeker. Something about Jesus has piqued his curiosity, and he genuinely wants to understand who Jesus is. He speaks to Jesus cautiously, in a measured way, asking questions to clarify his own understanding, and not to trap Jesus, as so often happens when Jesus encounters a “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). Note the contrast between Jesus’ various levels of self-revelation: to those who are falsely under the impression that they believe in him, Jesus refuses to entrust himself, but to those who genuinely want to understand Jesus, our Lord graciously entrusts himself completely. Those with false faith sense an opportunity for personal gain by following, and Jesus accordingly shuts them down. To those who seek the truth about Jesus with humble curiosity, on the other hand, Jesus happily teaches them. For anyone who cannot quite *believe* in Jesus, but yet cannot quite *reject* Jesus, Nicodemus offers a wonderful role model of someone who slowly learns to trust Jesus—a process that begins with this conversation.

Signs, Teaching, and Faith

Nicodemus begins his discussion with a respectful acknowledgment of Jesus’ ministry up to this point: “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” (John 3:2). Nicodemus rightly understands that the signs do not exist in isolation. Rather, his purpose for coming to Jesus is to understand Jesus’ *teaching* in light of the *signs* that confirm Jesus’ authority and authenticity. John Calvin explains, “miracles have a twofold advantage, to prepare the mind for faith, and, when it has been formed by the word, to confirm it still more, Nicodemus had profited aright in the former part, because by miracles he recognizes

Christ as a true prophet of God.”⁵ The signs have done their work to draw attention to Jesus—even if not all the attention was completely positive—and now Nicodemus seeks an opportunity to learn better what it is that Jesus’ signs are pointing toward.

Moreover, in the larger context of the Gospel, this conversation with Nicodemus becomes the first place that John gives us “the teaching of Jesus as the counterpart to the signs.”⁶ In addition to the signs of turning water into wine and cleansing the temple at Jerusalem (as well as the promise of the future sign of raising the temple of his body up three days after its destruction), when Nicodemus speaks of “signs” in the plural (John 3:2), he suggests that Jesus has also performed many other signs that John chooses not to include in his Gospel (cf. John 20:30; 21:24–25).⁷ So far, John has only recorded the signs for us (and, apparently, not all of them), but now the Evangelist directs our attention to Jesus’ *teaching* about these realities. Here we learn that, in the words of Craig Keener, “true relationship with God involves neither waterpots nor the earthly temple (a theme revisited in both cases in 4:10–14, 20–24, 28), but the water of the Spirit (3:5) and the revealer from above (3:11–21).”⁸ Since this particular conversation spans so many topics at the center of John’s message—the new birth of water and Spirit, the kingdom of God, the lifting up of the Son of Man, the salvation and condemnation surrounding Jesus—some have rightly classified John 3 as the “grand summary of Christ’s teaching” in the Gospel of John, akin to the function of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel.⁹

This is one of the many reasons that the 16th-century Protestant Reformers wrested the sacraments away from the “hocus pocus” realm of shrouded mystery and seeming magic to their rightful place under the ministry of the word.¹⁰ The Roman Catholic mass had become a religious performance, disconnected from the ministry of the word. To begin, the mass was offered in Latin, a language that almost none of the common people knew, so that few could understand what was happening in worship. Furthermore, the laity were permitted to receive the mass only rarely (usually once per year), and then only the bread, rather than the bread and the wine, as Jesus had commanded. The rest of the year, the people were permitted only to watch the priests perform the mass in front of them, in that secret language. Factoring in the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which taught that the bread miraculously becomes the body of Christ, and that the wine miraculously becomes the blood of Christ, the point of coming to mass was to watch the priests perform miraculous signs in an unknown language without any ability to participate.¹¹

Jesus, by contrast, was never interested in raw displays of his power apart from his word. Rather, he always insisted that his signs be interpreted in light of his teaching, and never apart from it. Following Jesus’ lead, the Reformers rejected the sacramental superstitions of the Roman Catholic Church, insisting that the sacraments are not mysterious magic, but that their power lies in the fact that they are signs pointing to larger realities of the gospel—realities that are governed by and clarified in God’s word, proclaimed and explained in the common languages.¹² Apart from the ministry of the word and the work of the Spirit, the sacraments have no power of their own.

“You must be born again”

Jesus, then, dives straight into the main thrust of his message, declaring, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Commentators sometimes engage in an unnecessary debate about whether the word for “again” should be instead

translated “from above,” but the ESV footnote is absolutely correct: “the Greek is purposely ambiguous and can mean both *again* and *from above*; also verse 7.” Indeed, the rest of the passage shows that both ideas are central to Jesus’ message. In favor of “again,” note that Nicodemus asks a clarifying question in the next verse about entering into his mother’s womb a “second” time (John 3:4).¹³ In favor of “from above,” Jesus will later explain that no one can understand heavenly things except one who has descended from heaven (John 3:12–13). That is, Nicodemus struggles to follow this conversation because he is earthly and needs to be born “from above”—that is, “from heaven.” Not only are both senses true, but only through wrestling with both senses can we fully understand the nature of this new birth.¹⁴

Note also that Jesus uses the word “cannot” in this opening lesson: “Unless one is born again he *cannot* see the kingdom of God.” The word “can” or “cannot” appears five times in this dialogue (John 3:3, 4 (x2), 5, 9), which is important for underscoring the stark contrast that Jesus is drawing. Even “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10) struggles to follow what Jesus is saying, not because Jesus is speaking in a confusing way, but because the reality he describes is something that only those who are born again *can* understand. For those who have not been born again, Jesus’ words are impossible to comprehend. We could sooner ask a blind man to understand color than to ask a once-born man to see the kingdom of God.

And speaking about the kingdom of God, John 3:3 and John 3:5 are the only places in John’s Gospel where we read about the kingdom of God (cf. John 18:36). This relative lack of attention on the kingdom provides a different emphasis from the Synoptic Gospels, where the kingdom of God is at the center of their messages. Still, we should not think that John is unaware of or unconcerned about the kingdom of God, for the fact that he mentions the kingdom here twice in this foundational dialogue with Nicodemus proves otherwise. Rather, John’s focus is less on the *kingdom* and more on the *King* himself.¹⁵ The kingdom of God, then, does not refer to something otherworldly in heaven, but to the Spirit-filled life under the lordship of Jesus.¹⁶

We should extend grace to Nicodemus when he does not immediately understand what Jesus has said, asking, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). To fairly interpret Nicodemus’s second question, it is helpful to know that the Greek version of this sentence includes a small Greek particle (*mē*) which is difficult to translate without adding several words. In brief, this word implies that Nicodemus expects a negative answer to his question.¹⁷ So, we might paraphrase Nicodemus’s question this way: “A man can’t enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, could he?” One commentator suggests adding phrases like “I know you cannot and do not mean that!” or “That much I see” to help understand Nicodemus’s tone.¹⁸

Nicodemus is intelligent, but he recognizes that he simply isn’t understanding what Jesus is trying to tell him. Rather than rejecting a superficial understanding of this teaching, Nicodemus instead humbly acknowledges his lack of understanding, and he asks for clarification. In this way, Nicodemus’s attitude models a humility that was entirely absent from the Jews who rejected Jesus’ *mashal* when he described his body as a temple that he would raise up three days after its destruction (John 2:19–20). When he doesn’t understand something Jesus is saying, he does not reject Jesus outright without trying hard to understand what Jesus is actually saying. Moreover, he is willing to ask Jesus for help, even though Nicodemus might have been too proud to do so as “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10).

Born of Water and the Spirit

Jesus is happy to clarify; however, the clarification will still not be enough to bridge the gap for someone who has not experienced the new birth from above. Again speaking in relation to the kingdom of God, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). What does it mean to be “born of water and the Spirit”? The Greek construction of the phrase “water and the Spirit” makes it clear that Jesus is not speaking about two different kinds of birth, as though Jesus were saying that one must first be born of water and then born of the Spirit.¹⁹ The phrase “water and the Spirit” are united behind a single preposition, “of,” so we must understand the whole phrase “born of water and the Spirit” as a unity. This eliminates the possibility of interpreting this verse in light of what Jesus says in the next verse, as though the “water” in some way refers to “that which is born of flesh,” while “the Spirit” refers to “that which is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6). To be “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) refers to the same reality of being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:6).

Therefore, when Jesus talks about being “born of water and the Spirit,” he is almost certainly talking about baptism. Obviously, Jesus is not talking about the fully developed Christian version of the sacrament of baptism, performed by rightly ordained ministers with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for Jesus has not yet risen from the dead in order to give his disciples the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20). Instead, Jesus is talking about the ministry of baptism that John the Baptist had begun (John 1:19–34), which is the ministry of baptism that Jesus and his disciples will pick up in the very next passage (John 3:22–24; cf. John 4:2). As the Baptist had insisted, baptism with water is a sign that points to the greater reality of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that the sign signifies: “I baptize with water....I came baptizing with water....I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (John 1:26, 31, 32). The Baptist’s ministry was to baptize with water for repentance as an anticipatory symbol of the ministry that Jesus would perform by baptizing with the Holy Spirit.²⁰ In the context of John’s Gospel so far, to be “born of water and the Spirit” *must* be interpreted as being born of the Spirit through baptism—that is, not merely through the sign of water baptism, but through the symbolized, signified reality toward which water baptism points: the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

This distinction between the sign and the thing signified helps sidestep the squeamishness of some commentators who worry about putting too much emphasis on water baptism, as though water baptism were tantamount with salvation, or a requirement for salvation. Not at all! William Hendriksen helpfully brings out the point that John the Baptist made, and the point that Jesus here makes, in this way:

The key to the interpretation of these words is found in [John 1:33] (See also 1:26, 31; cf. Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16) where water and Spirit are also found side by side, in connection with baptism. The evident meaning, therefore, is this: being baptized with water is not sufficient. The sign is valuable, indeed. It is of great importance both as a pictorial representation and as a seal. But the sign should be accompanied by the thing signified: the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. It is the latter that is absolutely necessary if one is to be saved. Note, in this connection, that in verses 6 and 8 we no longer read about the birth of

water but only about the birth of the Spirit, the one great essential.²¹

Water baptism symbolizes the greater reality of Holy Spirit baptism, but there is also a sense here (as through the rest of the Bible, as the theology of baptism gets filled out) that baptism is *more* than a sign, and additionally, as Hendriksen points out, a *seal*. That is, through water baptism, God certifies and authenticates the reality of his promises, that all who believe on Jesus will assuredly receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, the Holy Spirit uses water baptism (and gospel preaching; cf. Rom. 10:14–17) as “the divinely chosen earthly medium” for regeneration.²² God certainly *could* bring about the new birth directly, without the instruments of preaching and baptism; however, he *chooses* to utilize preaching and baptism as the means by which he grants new birth. For this reason, Peter can say that “Baptism...now saves you” (1 Pet. 3:21), and Paul can say that “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). Baptism saves you and puts on Christ for you not because of the water, but because of the Holy Spirit; however, the Holy Spirit uses the water as his instrument for saving you and putting on Christ for you.

Theologians call this close connection between water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism a “sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified,” where “the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.”²³ So, water baptism is not absolutely necessary for salvation, and just as Jesus did not condemn the thief on the cross for failure to receive water baptism (Luke 23:39–43), neither does God condemn the children of believers who die before being baptized. But while water baptism is not necessary for salvation, water baptism is still God’s *normative* process for bringing people into his kingdom by causing them to be “born of water and the Spirit.”

Born of the Spirit

As Hendriksen noted above, after Jesus references “water” as the sign pointing to the greater reality of being born of the Spirit, Jesus subsequently speaks exclusively of being “born of the Spirit” without including the word “water.” So, Jesus explains first that those who are merely born of flesh cannot somehow leap over into the reality of the Spirit unless they are actually born of the Spirit: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). This new reality requires a completely new birth. Nicodemus marvels at this thought (John 3:7), but Jesus insists that this new birth is a necessity for any who would enter the kingdom of God.

To explain this from a different angle, Jesus takes up the metaphor of the wind: “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” (John 3:8). As many have observed, the force of this statement is somewhat lost in English, since we have different words for “wind” and “spirit,” whereas Greek (and Hebrew, for that matter), uses the same word, *pneuma*. Still, Jesus’ point is not that the Spirit is the rogue person of the Trinity, doing whatever he wishes, but rather his work is *felt*, but not *seen* or *understood*. We hear the wind blowing where it will, and we see the effects of the wind as it carries off debris and pushes against our bodies, but we do not know where that wind has come from, and nor do we understand where it is going. Even today, when we have much greater understanding of meteorological concepts like atmospheric pressure systems, we still cannot fully account for the wind. It does what it will, and we *know* that the wind is at work, but at the end of the day, we have to acknowledge that we simply do not understand all its mysteries.

The same thing can be said, Jesus assures Nicodemus, of the work of the Holy Spirit, and of everyone who is born of the Spirit. Those who are merely born of the flesh are blind to these realities, and no amount of explanation can fully bridge the gap in understanding. The new birth is the only bridge that can help someone grasp what it means to be carried along by the unexplainable, untamable, unpredictable, sovereign Holy Spirit.

“So must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:9–15)

When Nicodemus asks how these things can be (John 3:9), Jesus presses into the fact that he should know these things if he is “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10). This is not a winking, joking nudge (“Hey, aren’t you supposed to be the teacher of Israel?”), but it is also not a cheap shot (“And you call yourself the teacher of Israel!”). Jesus is not rejecting Nicodemus, but he is speaking into the larger context of unbelief among Nicodemus’s colleagues, who have rejected Jesus’ message in spite of their ignorance, even though they claim to be teachers, and therefore experts. Notice that Jesus uses the plural form of “you”:

“Truly, truly, I say to you [singular], we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you [plural] do not receive our testimony. If I have told you [plural] earthly things and you [plural] do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you [plural] heavenly things?” (John 3:11–12)

For this moment, Jesus seems to be speaking beyond this one conversation with Nicodemus to reach into the entirety of his public testimony so far. Remember, earlier Nicodemus spoke of the “signs” (John 3:2) that Jesus has performed, even though the only *public* sign John has recorded was Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. Additionally, Nicodemus had addressed Jesus as “Rabbi,” calling him “a teacher come from God” (John 3:2), suggesting that Jesus has been teaching publicly in ways that John has not explicitly recorded. If this is the case, then when Jesus tells Nicodemus that “you” have not listened to or received Jesus’ testimony, he is likely speaking not about Nicodemus (singular), but about the religious leaders (plural) of whom Nicodemus is only one “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1).

When Jesus contrasts the “earthly things” with the “heavenly things” in John 3:12, many commentators argue that Jesus is putting the new birth in the category of an “earthly thing” that the astonished Nicodemus is unable to believe at this moment.²⁴ But if Jesus is indeed speaking about the unbelief among the religious leaders whom Nicodemus represents, then “earthly things” more likely refers to the refusal of the Jewish leaders to repent when Jesus cleansed the temple (John 2:13–22). That is, they refused to believe that he had the authority to perform the earthly sign of cleansing the (earthly) temple, so how will they believe him when Jesus begins to teach about the birth “from above”? Seen this way, in the context of the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus’ teaching about “earthly things,” it makes much more sense to take “heavenly things” as a reference to this new teaching about the new birth—a teaching that Nicodemus *also* has difficulty understanding.

Against this general unbelief, Jesus observes that none of the religious leaders have ever gone up into heaven, so perhaps they should listen a little more closely to him, since Jesus has come *down* from heaven (John 3:13). Rather than browbeating Nicodemus on this point further, Jesus instead turns his discussion in a curious direction, citing an Old Testament story from Numbers 21. There,

the Israelites had “spoken against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food’” (Num. 21:5). As a judgment upon this ingratitude not only for God’s redemptive work in leading the exodus out of Egypt, but also in providing for the needs of his people, God sends fiery serpents among the people, biting them so that many began to die (Num. 21:6). This prompts repentance, and the people cry out for a remedy. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent, and to put it on a pole, so that anyone who would look up at the bronze serpent could be healed through their faith, and would live.

Now, God could have told Moses to create a bronze image of an eagle or a mongoose to symbolize the kinds of animals that eat serpents. In other words, God’s salvation could have come from a symbol of crushing the source of death in the midst of Israel. Instead, God’s salvation comes by asking the Israelites to look upon the source of their death, that by looking on their death, they might be saved. In summarizing this story, Jesus says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14–15). Jesus compares the past lifting up of the bronze serpent to the eventual lifting up of *Jesus* on the cross. Just as the Israelites received life by looking upon the symbol of the serpent (which had brought them death), so all who look upon Jesus in his *death* through faith will receive eternal life. The wondrous glory of God is seen at the cross, where Jesus lays down his life in order that his people might live.²⁵

This is the point on which Jesus connects his having descended *down* from heaven and being lifted *up* on the cross, as D. A. Carson writes:

If Jesus is the ‘one who came from heaven’ (v. 13), how shall he return? The Synoptists think of the crucifixion and the exaltation as temporally discrete steps; John makes it clear that Jesus’ return to the glory he had with the Father before the world began (17:5) is accomplished by being ‘lifted up’ on the cross. It is this exaltation that draws people to him (8:28; 12:32). If in v. 13 the Son of Man is the revealer, the one who came down from heaven, here he is the sufferer and the exalted one—but it transpires that it is precisely in the matrix of suffering and exaltation that God most clearly reveals himself in the person of his Son. The theological connection between resurrection and exaltation is not infrequent in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 2:32–33; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; 2:6; Col. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:21). John goes farther, and theologically ties together the crucifixion, the resurrection and the exaltation.²⁶

Indeed, the signs and the teaching and the ministry of Jesus all intersect at a single point: the cross. The cross is not an optional add-on to Jesus’ mission, nor an unavoidable detour, but the chief purpose for which Jesus came. The Son of Man *must* be lifted up on earth, in order that he may ascend back into heaven from which he came.

What do you love? (John 3:16–21)

If being lifted up was the *work* that the Son of Man came to accomplish, then Jesus now explains the *purpose* behind his work. Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent as a symbol of death that

would give life to the people, so Jesus must be lifted up to die on the cross for the life of God's people in a more ultimate, permanent sense. Indeed, Jesus insists that he has come to *save*, and not to condemn: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Not only did God love the world by *sending* his only Son, but by handing his Son over to the hands of wicked men who will eventually crucify him.²⁷ Rather than clinging to his Son and allowing the world to perish, God generously, graciously, and mercifully *gave* his Son for the salvation of the world.

It is with good reason that this verse has become so famous. With extraordinary clarity and simplicity, this verse puts forward the gospel message, that because of God's great love for the world, anyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but enjoy eternal life. There are no more purification rituals to undergo, no more sacrifices to offer, and no more religious feasts to observe. All that God required of his people through the old covenant finds its fulfillment in the only Son of God, whom the Father gave for the life and salvation of the world. *Believe upon Jesus Christ, and you will not perish, but instead find eternal life, for God loves you enough to give his only Son for you!* Christians cannot proclaim—or hear—this message often enough.

The Condemnation

Still, this does not mean that absolutely everyone will be saved, or that there will be no condemnation whatsoever, even though condemnation was not the purpose for Jesus' coming into the world: "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" (John 3:17). The primary purpose for Jesus' being sent into the world was that the world might be *saved* through him, not condemned. But then we get clarification about where condemnation *does* come: "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" (John 3:18). There is, then, no condemnation for all those who believe, but those who fail to believe are thereby condemned. In other words, all those who reject Jesus will face condemnation because they have not believed in the name of Jesus.

Now, it is important that we understand exactly what Jesus means by "condemned," because it would be easy to misunderstand his words in this context, especially because the ESV uses the word "judgment" in verse 19 rather than "condemnation," even though the verb for "condemn" in John 3:17–18 (*krinō*) is related to the word for "judgment/condemnation" (*krisis*) in John 3:19: "And this is the judgment [*krisis*]: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." Notice carefully that the judgment/condemnation is not something additional that happens *because* people love the darkness rather than the light that has come into the world; rather, what John says is that the judgment/condemnation *is* that they love darkness rather than the light. Strictly speaking, eternal condemnation in hell is not like a prison sentence that people receive because of their sins, where the crime is completely different from the punishment. Instead, the condemnation of hell is where people receive the darkness that they love more than the light—that is, the crime *is* the punishment. Darkness *is* the condemnation compared to the great joy of enjoying the light of life, Jesus Christ.

Now that the light has come into the world, people respond to that light in two ways: "they either approach it or move away from it. The former move into the light of salvation, the latter depart from it into deeper darkness."²⁸ John puts it this way: "For everyone who does wicked things

hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 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 3:20–21). Those who fear for their works to be exposed run from the light into that deeper darkness (which is itself the condemnation), while those who recognize that the joy of gaining the light far outweighs the shame of being exposed as a sinner come to the light and find eternal life.

Counterintuitively, John then says that the light exposes something other than sin in those who come to the light: works that have been carried out (or wrought/worked out) by God (John 3:21). That is, the light is there not to reveal what horrible people we are; instead, the light reveals the good work that God has done to bring about faith in the only Son of God. Ironically, those who fear being exposed by the light are those who retreat back into greater and darker shame, while those who are willing to be exposed find that the light ends up revealing causes for rejoicing!

What do you love?

The way of the world is to manage behavior—or, failing at that, the other way of the world is to *hide* any failed attempts at behavior management. This endless cycle of seeking to manage behavior and to prevent the exposure of failure revolves around the fear of punishment (cf. 1 John 4:18). In contrast, the gospel announces something radically different from a plan for managing your behavior and your exposure liability. Instead, the gospel announces God’s *love*, coaxing you to love in response. When you love only yourself, fear will necessarily drive you into the darkness as a means of self-preservation; however, the darkness offers no hope for experiencing the love and salvation of the true light who has come into the world in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, when you see and love the light of Christ to the degree that you are willing to risk whatever it takes to gain his light, what you will find is a real, comprehensive, lasting, joy-filled salvation. This willingness will not come easy, for it will require an entirely new birth of water and the Spirit. Furthermore, if you wish to live, you must die to yourself. Just as the Israelites had to look in faith upon a symbol of their death in the bronze serpent, so we must look in faith upon the death of Jesus and consider that crucifixion to be what God says that it is—the exaltation of God’s only Son that provides eternal life to all who believe in him. This way of living represents such a radical departure from our normal, broken desires, that only God himself can carry out these works (John 3:21).

From our perspective, though, our hearts can be tested by asking one simple question: *What do you love?* What do you want to gain so badly that you will stop at nothing to gain it? Do you love your own life so much that you are willing to walk the path of darkness and shame to hide your guilt? Or, do you love the light of Jesus Christ so much that you are willing to come to his light at the cost of your being exposed for what you are? One path is, in itself, condemnation, while the other path leads to life in Christ.

What, then, do you love?

Notes

1. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 128.

2. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 186.
3. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 103. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.ix.i.html>>
4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 185.
5. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 106. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.ix.i.html>>
6. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 227.
7. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 187.
8. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 534.
9. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 227.
10. The phrase “hocus pocus” actually arises out of a Latin phrase from the mass: “hoc est corpus meum,” which means, “This is my body.”
11. “We have, therefore, abrogated that fictitious immolation and restored communion, which had been in a very great measure obsolete. For, provided men went once a year to the Lord's Table, they thought it enough, for all the remainder of that period, to be spectators of what was done by the priest, under the pretext, indeed, of administering the Lord's Supper, but without any vestige of the Supper in it. For what are the words of the Lord? Take, eat, and distribute among yourselves. But in the mass, instead of taking, there is a pretence of offering, while there is no distribution, and even no invitation. The priest, like a member cut off from the rest of the body, prepares it for himself alone, and takes it alone. How immense the difference between the things! We have, besides, restored to the people the use of the cup, which, though it was not only permitted, but committed to them by our Lord, was taken from them (it could only be) at the suggestion of Satan.” (John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. I: Tracts, Part I, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 167.)
12. “We hold, that in this ordinance the Lord does not promise or exhibit by signs, any thing which he does not exhibit in reality; and we, therefore, preach that the body and blood of Christ are both offered to us in the Supper and received by us. Nor do we thus teach, that the bread and wine are symbols, without immediately adding, that there is a truth which is conjoined with them, and which they represent.” (Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” 169.)
13. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 233.
14. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 188–89.
15. “Only here and in vs. 5 is the kingdom of God mentioned in the Fourth Gospel. This surely ties in with the fact that John focuses everything on the person of Christ. All the more prominent in the Fourth Gospel, therefore, is the ‘personal’ concept that corresponds to the concept of ‘the kingdom of God,’ that of ‘the Son of man’ as the fully empowered Revealer and Bringer of the kingdom of God, as Daniel 7 speaks of him. In what follows, what is called the kingdom of God here will be referred to as the descent from heaven of the Son of man (vss. 13ff.). But to attribute such significance to Jesus and to see (that is, to be permitted to share in) the kingdom represented by him, or to be allowed to enter it (so vs. 5), requires more than just being impressed by his miraculous power and ascribing to him a place of honor in the situation in which one finds oneself and considers oneself competent to judge. It requires a complete reversal in that situation, a reversal that Jesus describes as ‘being born from above.’” (Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 125.)
16. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 108. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.ix.i.html>>
17. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, (BDAG), rev. and ed., Frederick William Danker “μή,” 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 646.
18. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 235–36.
19. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 237.

20. “Accordingly it is against that baptismal background that one must understand Jesus’ pronouncement to Nicodemus. The message of the kingdom was bound up from the beginning not only with the call to repentance but also with water baptism, in close connection with which the baptism of the Holy Spirit had been held out as the gift of the Coming One (cf. 1:33). Therefore ‘water and Spirit’ can be used together of the birth needed to enter the kingdom: baptism as the putting off of the old, the Spirit as the creator and gift of the new life.” (Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 128.)

21. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 134. In context, Hendriksen cites John 1:22 (“So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’”) as the “key to the interpretation of these words,” but that must be a typographical mistake. In light of the other verses that he cites, Hendriksen certainly meant to identify John 1:33 as the key: “I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’”

22. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 237.

23. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 27:2.

24. “On the face of it, the obvious candidate for ‘earthly things’ is the new birth itself, the subject of Jesus’ conversation so far (hence *I have spoken to you of earthly things...*; cf. Blank, pp. 62–63). Some reject this interpretation because birth ‘of water and the spirit’ is ‘from above’ (*anōthen*), so it can scarcely be considered an ‘earthly thing’. But it is ‘earthly’ in that it takes place here on earth when people are born again. More important, Jesus’ teaching on the new birth is elementary...Jesus says, in effect, that entrance into the kingdom depends absolutely on new birth; if Nicodemus stumbles over this elementary point of entry, then what is the use of going on to explain more of the details of life in the kingdom? The ‘heavenly things’ are then the splendours of the consummated kingdom, and what it means to live under such glorious, ineffable rule.” (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 199.)

25. “It is part of John’s aim to show that Jesus showed forth his glory no in spite of his earthly humiliations, but precisely because of those humiliations. Supremely is this the case with the cross. To the outward eye this was the uttermost in degradation, the death of a criminal. To the eye of faith it was, and is, the supreme glory.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 200.)

26. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 201–02.

27. Köstenberger, *John*, 129.

28. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 51.