

John (Part 7)

Born Again/ Bearing Ones Cross / The Power of Choice

John W. Ritenbaugh

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We are going to be getting back into John 3. I am going to go right back to the beginning of the chapter—not the very first verse, but picking things up in verse 3, just to give a little bit of a review before we get to the place where we left off the last time.

John 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

I think this portion of the chapter is one of the most intriguing in the entire book of John. It is also probably one of the most misunderstood, and also one of the most important ones to understand for you and me.

It is interesting that in verse 3, it says "Jesus answered," though there was no question given. This is typical of the Bible. I do not know whether it is just typical of John, but it seems as though Jesus frequently anticipated what people had on their minds, and even though they had not yet brought it out, He answered what was on their minds.

This is interesting because there is no indication in the first two verses that Nicodemus was going to say anything about the Kingdom of God, but Jesus very quickly broached the subject because that appears to be the real reason for the visit. Notice that in the second verse, he said, "Rabbi, *we know* that you are a teacher come from God." That had important implications, because if Jesus was talking at all about the Kingdom of God at that time, and the Pharisees and the scribes and the Sanhedrin began to nose around as to whom this Man was, they would have begun to turn up some very interesting things in terms of prophecies made in the Old Testament.

They would have begun to see He indeed was a Jew of the house of David, that He was born in Bethlehem, and would have begun to put things together. Here He was speaking about the Kingdom of God—a message about government—and they were *in* government, so if they said that they knew He was a teacher from God, immediately they would begin to feel threatened by what He was saying.

I do not believe their feeling of threat was coming from Jesus Himself—it was actually the implications of what He was saying. It would very definitely have put them on the spot, either in terms of a confrontation with the Romans, or at least they would have been face-to-face with losing their position to this Man, and thus their authority within the community. That would have been very difficult to take.

It is good to understand that when you are reading it. Jesus very quickly broached the subject. He did it in order to calm Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin down. That is why this thing about being born again follows. He wanted to assure the Sanhedrin that He had no designs

whatsoever on their responsibility. He was not there to overthrow them. He was not there to overthrow the government. They did not have anything to fear from Him governmentally. He understood that His Kingdom was not of this world, and that is what this section on being born again discusses.

Notice in verse 3 it says, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Actually, without putting dates on anything, He is showing these people that they did not have to worry about Him establishing a Kingdom within His own lifetime.

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

When we add verses 6-8, He adds that one cannot enter the Kingdom of God until one is *changed changed into spirit*. If you want further proof of that, I Corinthians 15: 50-53 provides it.

Let us summarize what Jesus said here in this series of verses so that you will understand how to reach a conclusion regarding being born again—just from John 3 and I Corinthians 15:

- 1) Until one is born again, one cannot *see* the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not something that is physically visible at this time.
- 2) Until one is born again, one cannot *enter* into the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it becomes obvious that one has to be born again in order to be a part of it—that is, at least in terms of the way Jesus is speaking. He is talking about a *birth process*.
- 3) While we are still flesh and blood, one cannot *inherit* the Kingdom of God (I Corinthians 15: 50).
- 4) Until the resurrection, we will not be changed. (I Corinthians 15: 50-53)

The summation is this: until the resurrection, we cannot see, enter into, or inherit the Kingdom of God. Therefore, we cannot be born again while still flesh.

Nicodemus should have been able to pick that up from what Jesus said. It is just a matter of logic. If one believes what Jesus said, it is just a matter of adding up what He said. So the Sanhedrin should have had nothing to fear from Him attempting to overthrow the government, because being born again was something that was down the road—as we see now, 2,000 years away.

Two more things that I want to pick up before we leave this: the words "water" and "spirit." They imply things that are interesting to latch onto. Connect John 3 with Ephesians 5:26, where it says we are "wash[ed] of water by the word." The "water" in John 3 is obviously implying most directly baptism. Baptism is a symbol. On the one hand it is a symbol of death and burial. On the other hand, it is also a symbol of cleansing.

Water indicates cleansing. He is showing here that being born again is the *end result of a*

process of cleansing. It is a *continuous* process of cleansing. It is not something that occurs one time, but rather it is something that begins with baptism and continues with the washing of the water by the word *until* one is born again. That illustration is given to again reassure Nicodemus that "we are talking about the establishment of a government that is a long way down the road."

Once you begin to see these things, you can see logic behind why Jesus launched into this subject about being born again. Actually, what He was trying to do was relieve the pressure that these people would feel in having God in their midst (even though they did not really admit it), talking about establishing a government. Out of love, He is trying to relieve the pressure in their minds. But of course, they did not get it. They did not understand it.

The word "spirit"—if you look at the way it is used in other portions of the Bible (John 4: 24; II Timothy 1: 7; etc.)—you pick it up being used in the sense of power, attitude, nature, composition, impregnation, growth, and again it is an illustration of a *process*. Being converted, or changed to spirit, is the end result of a process. It is another illustration given to help relieve the pressure from Nicodemus' mind.

In the whole thing taken together, He is comparing spiritual birth with the human begettal and birth process, and Nicodemus should have been able to see the logic that from impregnation to birth was a nine-month *process*. That is what Jesus was trying to get across to him—that "we are dealing with a process here. I am not coming to establish a government right away. We can't even talk about the establishment of a government until one can enter into—be born into—the Kingdom of God."

John 3:9-12 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

There is an important lesson here for you and me. Nicodemus did not understand for the same reason that we often do not understand. I want you to turn back to Mark 7. In Mark 7, there is the occasion where the people came to Jesus and said, "Why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands?" We know that Jesus answered that in verse 6:

Mark 7:6-8 He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

The key phrase for you and me is "the traditions of men." The traditions of men were so deeply engrained in the mind of Nicodemus. In most cases, these men on the Sanhedrin were either

high-ranking Sadducees or Pharisees, and very deeply schooled in their beliefs. Their traditions were more deeply ingrained in their minds than most of the traditions that we are familiar with, because they had grown up with them, they had undoubtedly taught them over and over again as a part of religious instruction, they lived in them—being before the public eye—and they were, in that case, honor-bound (you might say) to defend them.

I Peter 1:18 Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers

That is what we have been redeemed from—the traditions of men. That involves everything from Christmas and Easter and Halloween and April Fool's Day and Valentine's Day, going to church on Sunday, infant baptism, going to heaven, going to hell, an ever-burning hell—you name it. The religions that we have come through have *traditions of men*, not the truth of God. It is traditions of men with a smattering of the truth of God. That is what blinds us.

Whether we have any religious training or not, the ideas—the traditions—of this world are part and parcel of our thinking. God has permitted that, and we are blinded by that, and even a man of the position, the rank, the intelligence as Nicodemus—a teacher of Israel—did not get it.

It is interesting what David said in Psalm 139: 23-24: "God *lead me* to your truth." David understood that he, too, had been blinded by the traditions of men. Then he told God, "*Search me to see if there is any false way in me.*" We have to do that—we have to ask God to reveal His truth, so that we will be better prepared.

Back to John 3. If I can paraphrase, Jesus said, "Look, I have made a simple comparison to human processes and experiences—those are the things of the earth—why is that so hard?" God's way is simple. It is not hard, but we do confuse the issues.

John 3:13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

The heavenly things are the spiritual mysteries that we are learning. Jesus is declaring—making manifest to mankind—those spiritual mysteries. Nobody is better qualified, because He came down from heaven and He *witnessed* these things. This is very important to you and me. I will get to the importance of it a little later in the chapter.

John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Here is a major reason why He descended: in order that He might be "lifted up." He uses as an illustration something that occurred back while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, and it is recorded back in the book of Numbers. There is a very important spiritual lesson here.

Numbers 21:4 Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way.

Just try to put yourself into the position of these people, because we, too, are on a way—we are on our way to the Kingdom of God. We become discouraged from time to time, and we turn out of the way—not just from discouragement, but from sin. Well, this people's discouragement *became* *became* a sin.

Numbers 21:5-6 And the people spoke 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread." So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

God gave them a curse for their rebellion—for their lack of appreciation for what He was providing for them. That is very interesting, because it says in another place—I believe in the Psalms—that the people ate "angel's food." But they called it "worthless." It just shows you how much they knew about what was good for them. Undoubtedly, God gave them the very best food for that kind of environment, and for what they were doing. It is something that He supplied every day, it was fresh, and it must have really been wonderful stuff because they could bake it, they could boil it—whatever they wanted to do to it, they could. I do not know what it was, but they did not appreciate it.

Numbers 21:7-9 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned [after the pain came], for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

That is where the illustration came from that Jesus used in John 3. The people sinned; God plagued them, and punished them to the point of death. But if they lifted their eyes toward God and the symbol of their sin—the symbol of their sin was the brazen serpent—they were healed. If they had not sinned, there would have been no plague. So the literal serpents that bit them reminded them of their sin. That is why God had them make the brazen serpent: it reminded them of their sin.

Moses was told to erect it on a pole, and to put the pole where the people would have to look *up* at it—higher up above the people. The implication there was obvious—that they were looking up toward God. When they gazed upon the serpent, then they would be healed.

II Corinthians 5:20-21 Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Christ became sin. There is nothing more symbolic of sin than a serpent. Satan is the author of sin. When Christ became sin for us, He took upon Him all of the sins of all of mankind for all of the time that man is on earth. He literally became sin. That is why God made them make the brazen serpent: it symbolized sin. God was not only thinking of these people then; He was thinking of you and me coming along later and understanding the symbolism that was involved here.

Christ was on a stake. When we look to Christ, and ostensibly on beyond Christ to God, then *we* are healed spiritually.

The lesson goes even further. Notice that He said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). What Jesus went through was very difficult. It was painful and agonizing, and it was very shameful for Him to become sin and to be killed in such a way. So He had to bear His cross. But beyond that was the glory of being born into the Kingdom of God.

Here comes the lesson: "even so *must*"—without what Christ did, there was no glory, either for Him or for us. It was absolutely essential that one die for the sins of man. God chose, apparently, that that death be the most shameful and ignominious that period of time could offer—that is, death on a stake; death by crucifixion. So Christ had to bear that.

You can see from what He went through in Gethsemane that He really did not want to do it in the sense that He knew it was going to be painful. He knew it was going to be shameful—very embarrassing. He knew that He was innocent, so He struggled with having to bear that responsibility—to drink that cup. But if He did not do that, there was no being with God again. Neither would there be salvation for you and me, because there would be no penalty paid.

Like as Christ received glory, salvation, and being born into the Kingdom of God—and it is important that you remember that in this context because He is still talking to Nicodemus; that conversation has not ended yet—through bearing the cross, so do we. Did a minister ever go through Luke 14:27 with you before you were baptized? "He who does not bear his cross" is not worthy of Me. Without the cross being borne by you and me, there is no glory for you and me.

Just as surely as Christ wrestled with that, and He really did not want to go through with it, He *knew* it was absolutely necessary. It was a duty. It was an obligation that He had to do, or there would be no salvation for man, neither would there be for Him either. So He "bit Himself," you might say—cut off His feelings of human nature—rather than take the convenient way, the easy way out.

There is vital information there. We are going to be confronted with difficult choices from here on out—things that our mind and body are going to scream against—but it is part of the cross that we have to bear. We have taken in up, and that is the way character is going to be built.

We are going to be fighting against the traditions of men from here on out.

All of these ideas, these concepts, these attitudes that have come into our minds from the time we are born, they have not come from the Tree of Life. They have come from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and they have got to be gotten rid of. That is where the pain is coming from—overcoming the traditions of men. Look at all of the bad habits and everything that have come to us.

That is the way of escape. You people who have temper problems; you people who have problems with drinking; you people who have problems with laziness; you people who have problems with *anything*—a nasty tongue—there is no easy way out. You just have to lift up your cross and go on.

Christianity is not convenient. That is why Jesus warns us, "You have got to love Me more than father, mother, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, and not only that, you have got to love Me more than yourself." That is why the ministry goes through that with people before they are baptized. You have to be a living sacrifice.

John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him
should not perish but have eternal life.

There is the glory. If we bear our cross, then we will inherit like Christ did.

Just in passing, very quickly, the word "believes" is the key here. This is the hardest thing because we are so influenced by the traditions of men. We are so influenced by the around, the about, the physical. It is all we have known, until the reality of God's Kingdom came exploding into our minds. So believing is the key. That is what unlocks everything. Love is the key thing in the sense that this is what we are growing toward—the love of God. This is His primary attribute. But faith is the foundation. Believing is the foundation. Without that foundation of faith, other things do not fall into place. So it is he who *believes* that will not perish. He is the one who will have eternal life.

James explains that there are two kinds of faith. There is a dead faith, and there is a living faith. The dead faith is nothing more than intellectual. It is academic. "Yeah, I believe that there is a God." But it does not produce anything. But *living* faith produces a response to God's Word. Usually we say it will produce obedience.

In fact, those two are so close that if you look in Hebrews 3, Paul is explaining there why Israel failed in the wilderness. He finally concludes it in Hebrews 4:1-2 where he said that what they heard was not mixed with faith. But if you get a couple of different Bibles—especially a modern one—and you combine it with the King James, you will find that the words disobedience and disbelief, obedience and faith, are all interchangeable. They are so close that what the translators are saying is that one implies the other.

If you have faith, you obey. If you do not have faith, you disobey. Sometimes the word faith is there but it is obvious that the writer did not intend the word faith—what he intended was the word obedience. So they will put the word obedience in instead of the word faith, because it

gives a better sense of what the author intended. Look at that—it is very interesting.

Living faith produces a response. Dead faith produces nothing. Those who respond are the ones who are not going to perish.

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

When we begin to really understand God, we begin to understand a little bit of His love. But it is also amazing, I think, to anyone who does begin to understand this to wonder why in the world God does not just blow this place to pieces.

Did you ever do anything that you were really proud of—make a model, paint a car—something you really thought well of, and somebody came along and destroyed it, or marred it, or spoke evil against it? What did you feel like? God created this earth in beauty, and look what we have done with it. Look what we have done to our bodies. If God was not God, and He did not have the character that He has, and He did not have the love to carry through, and He did not have the vision to see the beauty of what He is creating in you and me, He would have blown this place up long ago. I know for sure that is why Herbert Armstrong said the first thing he always said in prayer to God was "thank you ~~that~~ you are God."

"God so loved the world. . . ." His concern for His creation, and His confidence in His ability to carry through on what He has started and produce something good out of it, is just beyond reckoning by you and me. It is just too much.

You have to understand God's love, though. God's love is not indulgent. His concern is not just to *give* things to His creation. His gifts always have purpose behind them, and sometimes His gifts are in the form of discipline and punishment. We have to understand that His love is not like an old teddy-bear grandfather. His love includes pain with it. His love is whatever it takes to help produce something good.

For you and me, most of the time what that means is God's love confronts us with choices. Someday we are going to learn what a power we have—I mean the power of choice. Do you realize that when God liberated you and me from the grip of Satan the Devil that is what He did? When God is talking about liberty, do you understand what He is talking about? Do you understand the purpose of Mr. Armstrong's booklet about being kidnapped by Satan? When we were kidnapped by Satan, God says that we bought what the kidnapper had to offer. Once we buy what the kidnapper had to offer, we were from that time on his slave, and we did not have the right or the power of choice, but rather we did what the kidnapper wanted us to.

The way God's love works is that He opens our mind to set us free to give us the *choice* of whether to go the right way or the wrong way. We have to choose. Our liberty consists of knowing what to do. That is the way His love toward us is exercised. He frees our mind from enslavement to Satan the Devil by opening up to us the truth of the purpose of life—why we are here, where we are going. He keeps on giving us love through the education. Every once in

a while He gives us love in the form of a painful punishment in order to get us back on the right track again.

Your right of choice is an awesome power. It is a power that the world has yet to have given to them. They cannot exercise it anywhere near to the extent that we can. They are not free to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. They are not free to tithe—one tithe, two tithes, three tithes—and give offerings on top of that. Do you recognize what a blessing that is—to have that choice to be blessed by God because you are learning to be generous? The world does not have that yet.

They are not free to keep the Sabbath—and on and on it goes. They are not free to understand the spirit of God's law. They may be free enough to see the letter, but they are not free enough to see the intent of that law in all of its ramifications. But we are. If we yield to God, He will keep educating us. The more that we understand of His truth, the freer we become. That is what liberty is: it is to be free to make choices.

What Jesus is saying here is, "Look, you are free to accept this or reject it." That is how God shows His love to us. To make it easier, His Son paid the penalty—because we had no choice in that. Since we sinned, we were headed toward death. But once we accept the crucifixion—the blood of Christ—then we become freer to make more choices relative to eternal life.

There are several more things from these verses that are important to know. "For God so loved the world. . . ." First of all, this is another confirmation that the initiative for salvation begins with the *Father*—not the Son. The Protestant world has the idea—and so does the Catholic world, by the way—that the Son's death *appeased* the Father. That is not true. It did not *pacify* the Father; it satisfied the law.

The Father and Son were in perfect agreement. So the initiative, even for the crucifixion of the Son, began with the Father. He is the head of the Family. He is the head of this organization. Mr. Armstrong complained so much in his last couple of years of life that the world has forgotten about the Father. They honor the Son to some degree, but the Father they shove into the background—yet He is the one who should be honored over and above the Son. As we see here, it is another indication that everything began with the Father.

The next thing is you can see that the essence of God's love is to *give*. It is sacrificial. What He gives you and me is instruction. He gives discipline. He gives His Spirit. He grants repentance. On and on it goes.

The third thing is that these verses show that He loved the world. It is not just "good" people that He loves. It is not just Israel that He loves. It is *the world* that He loves.

Another thing is it also shows how powerful sin is, and what a great power it takes to overcome it. It took the Creator to overcome it. He is willing to make that sacrifice.

The fifth thing here is that only those who believe will benefit from this love. That is a choice.

John 3:17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

On the other hand, we are going to read by the time we get to John 5 is that Christ was sent to the world—out of His own mouth—to *judge* the world. Is there a dichotomy here? On the one hand, He is not here to condemn, but on the other hand, He does judge. This is very interesting. How can there be both, on the one hand, love, and on the other hand, judgment? They seem to be opposites in people's minds, but they are not really. How can there be both love and judgment in the same acts? It has to do with the word "believe."

Remember that a person who has living faith responds, and it is the response of the individual that determines whether God is going to condemn him, or whether God is going to love Him.

Let me give you an illustration: Most people admit that Beethoven wrote great symphonic music. Let us just say that everyone here agrees that he wrote great symphonic music—this is just an illustration—and that that music really thrills you. We will pick out Beethoven's Fifth. You want to share this. So the music begins—off it goes—and you are really enraptured by it. You look over 15 minutes later, and your friend is sound asleep.

The music is really above question as being a great gift. But the person's rejection of it as something not even worth listening to has condemned him as a real clod. The person just did not appreciate what was given. It is the same thing with Christ. If the person does not believe, then the person does not appreciate, and the person does not respond. The person brings the judgment on himself. But if *he* does respond, God just keeps giving more and more blessings. It all depends on the person's belief. That is why in one situation there can be both gift and condemnation.

I will give you another illustration—I just happened to think of this one. This one really happened. A guide was taking a tour group through the Louvre in France, and they were at some of these great works of art. Some crass person—probably an American; I do not know—said to the guide, "I do not think very much of your pictures here." The guide said to him, "Friend, these pictures are beyond judgment. *You* are the one who is being judged." All he did was show what a clod he was. What vanity, that he could even begin to put down the works of great artists.

It is the same thing here with Christ and us. It is our reaction to God's gift that is determining our future.

Verse 18 really nails it down:

John 3:18 He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already. . . .

It is not Christ who is on trial; it is our *reaction* to Christ that is on trial. He does not have to prove Himself. The quality is already there. It is established. It is far greater than Beethoven. It is far greater than any of those great artists of the past. They have already passed muster. It is we who hear it or view it who are on trial. So our reaction is going to determine it.

John 3:18-19because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light

[beauty, joy, goodness, love] has come into the world, and men loved darkness [that was their reaction] rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

Light is a symbol of truth. Light reveals. Truth reveals. Light reveals what is in the around and the about. Truth reveals what is on the inner man—what is there. Sometimes a blinding light hurts our eyes. So it is with the truth of God. Men fear detection. That is why crimes are done at night.

Some of you might remember when we had the hall down there in Norwalk—when the church was renting that hall down there. It was not in a very good neighborhood. We were constantly having trouble with broken windows, and all kinds of vandalism. One of our deacons went to consult with the police as to what we could do about it. We were thinking we could put a fence all around it, put some bars over the windows, and stop the big stuff that they were throwing—we would find concrete blocks on the inside every once in a while. At any rate, the policeman that advised us said that he felt that probably the best thing we could do—the most economical thing we could do—was to just to make sure that the area was very well lighted. So that is what we did, and it did cut down the vandalism a great deal. It did not stop it entirely, but it really did impact on it so we were not repairing the building every couple of weeks like we were doing before.

Here He is talking about it in a spiritual sense. Truth reveals a person's intent to do good or evil. It reveals a person's essential character, and unfortunately men often do not want to make the change. They do not want the detection of what they are. Most of all, maybe, they do not want it revealed to themselves, because the darkness gives them something convenient to hide behind.

I John 1:6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

If we are not *keeping* the truth, we are walking in darkness, and we are lying—to ourselves and others—because we are not practicing the truth.

You will remember that I said at the beginning that there were some words that John used more frequently than the other writers did, and of course one of these was "light." Another one is the word "true," and the word "true" is more closely associated with our English word "reality" than it is with our word "truth."

Please understand that "truth" is not a mistranslation. It is just that wherever this word appears, it is really closer to our word "reality" than our word "truth." If we apply that to this section here (in John 3) about walking in truth or walking in the light, what we are saying is that if a person is keeping the truth, doing the truth, he is conducting his life according to the realities of God's Word.

The Kingdom of God, which is invisible, and God, who is invisible, have become a reality to him. Because of his faith, it is more real than the vanities that we see around us. The vanities that

we see around us are also real, but if you understand in a biblical sense they are less real than the realities of God because they are temporary realities, whereas God and the Kingdom of God and the spiritual truths are eternal.

This is where the power of choice is important. Which way are we going to choose? Are we going to choose that way which is convenient and temporary, or are we going to choose that way which might be inconvenient, but is permanent—eternal? That is where the choices lie.

John 3:20-21 For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

The person who loves truth—the person who loves reality—wants to glorify God. From this we can extract the definition of a humble person. It is a simple definition: a humble person is simply one who yields to reality—the reality of God. Once you understand that you can understand why a person could be humble (like Moses) and yet order an army to kill lots of people. He was yielding to the reality of God's command. God was more real to him than the pain that would be inflicted on those people who would *seem* to be innocent.

That is apparently the end of the conversation with Nicodemus. It is interesting that it should end on that note about darkness and light, because Nicodemus came at night. It is obvious that he did not want people to see him, because he had the idea that coming to see Jesus would condemn him before these pitifully weak human beings. People were more real to him than the God of heaven of whom he was speaking. There is powerful teaching there. You can begin to see the logic of why Jesus talked about what He did.

John 3:22-26 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. For John had not yet been thrown into prison. Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"

There is no indication that Jesus actually baptized anyone, but undoubtedly people were being baptized *into* Him. I believe that it is one of those things that God would not want Jesus to do lest the person brag later on that he had been baptized by the Christ Himself. Paul was so careful that he said in the book of I Corinthians that he had only baptized the household of Stephanus. He said he was afraid people would brag about that. So I am almost certain that is not something that Christ would do, but rather He would assign it to someone else, which has some more teaching in it: it is not the person who actually does the baptizing that is important. It is what they are being baptized *into* that is important, and whether or not they are repentant.

From the implications in verse 25 especially, the context seems to show that what brought this subject up was that the converts and disciples of John the Baptist were leaving him for Christ.

Verse 26 introduces a section that is important to understanding John the Baptist. He set a fine example for every one of us. You begin to see his loyalty, his submissiveness, to what God has chosen for him to do. Compare it with the success that he had in reaching the people up to that point. I think there is no doubt that he really reached a lot of people, because "everybody" was being baptized by John the Baptist, so he really had a great following.

John 3:27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.

That is interesting because what he was saying was, "Jesus of Nazareth is not taking disciples from me. God is giving them to Him." What an outlook! It shows the depths of his understanding, because humanly, carnally, we would feel as though somebody were cheating us—taking something from us—and our ego would feel crushed, hurt, and offended. There is no indication that he felt that way.

John 3:28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.'

He is saying that we must be content with what God gives. "I have received a commission, and power to carry it out, and now it is time to lay that aside."

John 3:29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice.

Another illustration here. He said, "I have had an important part, but my part—my importance—lasts only until my part is complete. I am the friend of the bridegroom." In Jewish weddings, the friend of the bridegroom was the person who was like the liaison between the bride and the groom, and the bride and the groom and the public. He was the one who was responsible for making arrangements for the wedding, and all of the details that went with it. He presided over the wedding—not the bridegroom, but the friend of the bridegroom presided over it. The last responsibility that he performed was that he was the guard at the bride's bridal chamber to make sure that nobody got in until he heard the voice of the groom, and then he would open the door to the bridegroom, and then his job was over.

That is what John was comparing himself to. "I have made all the arrangements. I have prepared the way. I have now heard the voice of the bridegroom; it is now time for me to retire—to get out of the scene." What he was saying here, very clearly, is that "I am not a rival to the Christ. The Christ is not a rival to me. I have done my part. He must increase; I must decrease." That was the end of it.

Life would be a great deal simpler and easier if all of us could be prepared to play a subordinate role—until God called us, or put us into something, we would save an awful lot of heartache, and an awful lot of offense. What we have to learn is to do what God has given us with all of our heart. If He gives us more, great.

That is the way John looked at it. I do not know whether John knew it, but he too would have to face an ignominious death. He could feel badly about that, and you understand that he began to have doubts while he was in prison. So you know that he was being assailed by Satan in there, and doubts began to creep in, but he recovered undoubtedly.

John 3:29d-31 Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.

This is actually expounding a little bit further on what Jesus said in verses 12 and 13:

John 3:12-13 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

John is adding to that. What he is adding is that there is nobody who is as able, who is as fit, who is as prepared, who is as qualified to speak on the things that Christ is going to speak of as Christ Himself—because He came down from heaven. He witnessed all of these things with His eyes.

John 3:32-34 And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure.

Colossians 2:8-9 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men [there are those traditions again], according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead [divine nature] bodily

This is why Christ was qualified to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. John 3: 34 has been given to help us understand why He was so qualified: not only did He come down from heaven, but He had the Spirit of God in its fullness. He did not have it "by measure." So what Christ said was not second-hand information. It is not a tale that is twice-told. He got everything from the "horse's mouth"—because in Him dwells all the fullness of the divine nature bodily.

Go with me to the third chapter of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews, especially in about the first 9 or 10 chapters, is arranged in a series of comparisons. Every comparison is designed to show you that Christ is superior to something. In the first chapter, He is superior to angels. In the second chapter, the message that He preached is superior to any message that mankind has ever heard. In the third chapter, Paul shows that He is superior to Moses. There is a reason why he chose Moses: Moses was the great law-giver, under God, and he was the one who was looked upon as the man who established Israel as a nation.

Hebrews 3:1-2 Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house.

Here comes the comparison. I want you to notice that "Moses was faithful in all His house." Notice that in your Bible the word "His" is capitalized so that you would understand to what "His house" refers. "His house" is Christ's house.

Hebrews 3:3-6 For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

I read that to you because I want you to understand that even the greatest of men could not even begin to measure up to Christ. Everybody except Christ had the Spirit of God doled out to him, just sufficient enough to do the job. But Christ had the Spirit of God without measure. He came down from heaven. This is what John is pointing to that qualifies Him to be able to do what He did. Nobody even comes close.

John is giving this as a reason why he is so willing to be loyal, so willing to be submissive, so willing to give up his following. There is no reason for him to hang on to it. If we could just get this in our own lives, an awful lot of infighting and politicking and so forth within the Body of Christ—within the church—would end. A person cannot be given anything unless God gives it. People can take things away, but if they do, God will take *them* away, and they will not soon be with the Body.

John 3:32 And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony.

That is just a generality to show that men have rejected what Christ said. Here is this Messenger from heaven whom mankind rejected.

John 3:33 He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true.

Another way to say that is "has put this seal upon the fact that God is true." A seal is what used to be affixed to documents. Notaries still do that. You have a stamp, and you put on the seal, and that affirms or certifies that what is on the paper is true. That is what he is talking about here: if a person really believes Christ; if a person really accepts the witness of Christ (which is the gospel of the Kingdom of God), he then begins to put it in practice in his life, and that is the certification that what Christ has said is true—it works. It is in the life of the person who has been converted.

That is the kind of certification God is looking for. That is why we have to be a living sacrifice, so we will *know* the truth of God. That is what John is saying here, just in different words.

John 3:35 The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.

Jesus had the authority because of God's love for Him, and God loved Him because Jesus responded to Him perfectly.

John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

In regards to the way the Bible uses "life." We are *living*, but according to God that is not real life. Eternal life includes not only length of time, it is a quality of life. It is the way God lives. It is the abundant life.

What he is showing in verse 36 is this is the choice we have. We have the choice between the reality of God life, and the opposing reality of human life. Our life is real, but it is *temporary*. God's life is also real, but it is *permanent*. Which way are we going to choose? Back in Deuteronomy, God said, "Choose life." They were already alive; He obviously meant "choose *abundant* life. Choose God life." That is the choice God opens up to you and me. Which reality are we going to choose? Both are real, but one is more real than the other because it is permanent.

What he is showing there is that God has set before us on one hand life and death, and He says "choose life." Eternal life (please understand this) is a *quality* of life, not just length of life. That quality of life is produced by the keeping of the commands of God, guided by, and empowered by, the Spirit of God.

John 4:1-3 Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and

departed again to Galilee.

These first three verses show very clearly why He left. To put it simply, He left in order to avoid a storm of controversy. He did it because discretion was the better part of valor. If He had stayed around, He would have created a scene.

Back in Ecclesiastes 3, where it says "there is a time to" do this, and "a time to" do that, in verse 7 it says, "there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." He got out of Judea because He felt it was time not to speak there any longer. Things were moving along too rapidly. I am sure He did not want to create the wrong impression in the minds of people—that they would get the idea that He was building a movement that was going to take over the reins of government.

Also, at the same time, He was creating a stir among the Sanhedrin. That is why Nicodemus was there, and it was creating controversy. He was building opposition. Even though His intent was pure, opposition was building against Him. You throw into that also the confusion that was beginning to build in the minds of John the Baptist's disciples, so He just left. He could always come back, and He did. So He left Judea, and departed into Galilee.

John 4:4 But He needed to go through Samaria.

If you remember, the land of Israel is kind of divided up into three sections. In the south was Judea; in the middle was Samaria; in the north was Galilee. There was a way to get to Galilee without going through Samaria, but it was a lot longer. In order to get there, He would have had to have gone east, across the Jordan River, and then gone up on the east side of Jordan, and then cut back in. If He went straight north on the roads that went across the top of the ridges, it was roughly a three day walk from Jerusalem to Capernaum. If He went the other way, it was about a six-day walk. So He cut His time in half, but He had to go through Samaria.

If you know anything about the Jews' attitude toward the Samaritans, you know that they did not like one another. "Hate" would be a better word—they hated each other's guts. So most of the time, unless there was a pressing reason, the Jews would generally opt for going the longer way so that they did not have to go through (what they considered) the "bad part of town." They would just go around it. But Jesus was different. He marched right straight through Samaria.

There are some interesting things that come up, and lurking in the background here is prejudice in a lot of things: prejudice toward the Samaritans, and prejudice toward women. Jesus is going to show you very clearly that for us to hold prejudices because of race, or because of language, or because of sex, is not going to cut the ice with Him. We probably will not be in the Kingdom of God if we are holding prejudices. There are some interesting reactions in here.

John 4:5 So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar. . . .

Sychar is the same city which is called "Shechem." It is about 800 years later, and the Samaritans have moved in, and they changed the name of the city. But it is the same place.

John 4:5 . . . near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

Those things are back in Genesis 33, Genesis 48, and Joshua 24. You can see some of the things that lurk in the background—the history of Israel. Shechem was a very important place because Joseph was buried there. It is important on that account. Jacob had made an altar there. It was important on that account too.

John 4:6 Now Jacob's well was there.

Jacob's well sat right near a fork in the road. If you followed the left fork, you went into Shechem. If you followed the right fork, which would have been the way that Jesus would have went, you went up toward the Sea of Galilee. Jacob's well was right near that fork, so it was a crossroads for a lot of traffic. The well was not in town. It was well outside the city of Shechem. In the city of Shechem, they had other wells. But Jacob's well was outside the city.

John 4:6 Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

It is interesting that He got tired too. He was human! The sixth hour was noon, maybe the hottest part of the day. He was thirsty. He was undoubtedly dusty. He was tired, and He sat down there in order to take a rest.

John 4:7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink."

Maybe this would not enter most of our minds, but there are two things that are interesting. First of all, the Jewish women hardly ever got water in the middle of the day. Most of the time, water was gathered at night—I should say at dusk—when the sun was going down, the labors of the day were over, they were getting ready for bed, and so they would bathe before going to bed to get all of the dust and the grime of the day off them. So water was gathered normally at night. That is one thing: what was she doing there in the middle of the day?

A second question: why was she coming to this well? There were wells in town. Why come to this one? We can only suppose, or assume, because we see a little bit later that she had had five husbands, she was a pretty immoral person. It may have been that she was an outcast. I think it is highly likely that she was a social outcast. If that be true, it is an indication of what she was doing there in the middle of the day. It gives an indication as to why she was outside the city getting the water—that she was not socially accepted at the places where people would normally get their water. So she had no recourse but to get her water outside the city, at a time when she was pretty sure that nobody who would know her would even be there.

So we see Jesus being confronted by a person who was first of all a Samaritan; secondly, she

was a woman; thirdly, she was a pretty immoral woman. That poor lady had three strikes against her right from the very beginning. Jesus was a Jew; Jesus was a man. Jewish custom was to hate the Samaritans, to not have anything to do with them, to avoid them whenever possible, not to speak to them—anything.

Contemporary literature indicates the Jews had almost the same feeling toward women—even their own wives. It is written in the Mishna that a Rabbi was *not* to speak to his wife (or his daughter) in public—not to do it out on the street. It is written in their Mishna that they argued whether a woman—as they said—had a soul. Their attitude toward women was not very good—it was far worse than it is today by a long shot.

Do you see what God is setting up here? It is a valuable lesson in tolerance toward others who are different from you. God expects you to treat them with respect, with dignity, with honor, in the same way that you would expect yourself to be treated, because that is exactly the way Jesus treated her. It did not seem to bother Him one bit that she was a woman, an immoral woman, a Samaritan—all three at one time. In fact, by purpose He put her into a position to serve Him—in order to open the gates. Again, you see, God took the lead. He invited her to respond to Him.