

## God is True

### *These Things are Written that You May Believe Series*

#### **John 3:22-36**

Pastor Bryan Clark

There would be those in our culture who would say they do not believe there is such a thing as absolute truth. If that's correct, then there would be no reason to believe their absolute statement about truth. But I think most reasonable people, deep in their gut, know there is such a thing as that which is true, and that which is false, which then raises an interesting question: How do we know what's true about God and His salvation? Who should we listen to? I would suggest to you this morning, the best person to listen to about what is true of God, is God. And that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible turn with us to the Gospel of John, Chapter 3. We pick it up in verse 22.

Verse 22 begins with these words: **After these things**. So, what things? Let's do a quick review. John the Baptist has identified Jesus as the *Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*. Jesus then performs His first miracle—what John calls a *sign*—at a wedding where He turns water to wine. But I suggested to you there's more than just a miracle there. Actually there's an imagery as He takes the water from the old covenant that was just meant as a ceremonial cleansing, and turns it to wine, identifying that He is the One who has come to be the fulfillment of the old covenant. And what ceremonial water could never actually do, He would do through His shed blood. It then moves to the cleansing of the temple, where Jesus identifies Himself as the fulfillment of the temple. He is the true temple. The glory of God does not ultimately reside in a structure; it resides in a person—and Jesus, identified through His death, burial and resurrection, He would be the fulfillment of the images of the temple. Then John moves to a conversation with a highly religious man by the name of Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “You can't even *see* the kingdom of God unless you experience new birth, unless you are *born again*,” born from above—a miraculous birth that only comes through Jesus. Nicodemus was reminded that ultimately Jesus would be lifted up on a cross in order to make payment for sin, that those who look upon Him can be saved. And the way of salvation is not religion; it's not good deeds, but belief that Jesus is the Savior. That gets us then to verse 22. It's hard to figure out how much time has passed. It's possible that Jesus went back up to Galilee for a while and has come back down into Judea. Or it's possible that the text is just saying he moved from Jerusalem, out to the more rural areas of Judea.

**After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and *people* were coming and were being baptized — for John had not yet been thrown into prison.** (\*NASB, John 3:22-24)

So Jesus and His disciples—this wouldn't be limited to the twelve, just all those that are following Jesus—are baptizing people that just keep coming. The grammar would indicate that. Now we find out in chapter four that it was actually Jesus' disciples that were doing the baptisms. This would not have been what we would refer to as believer baptism. To be identified with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus makes no sense before Jesus died, was buried and rose again. So, this would have been the same as John's baptism, a baptism of repentance. I think this adds credibility to our interpretation. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born of the water and the Spirit,” people were pouring out to be baptized. This was a major happening; Nicodemus would have been fully aware of that, and I think that's probably what Jesus was saying to him. John is baptizing some

distance away. We don't know where **Aenon** is; the word means basically *springs*, lots of springs of water. There are several places between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee where that could have happened. But John, the Gospel writer, also tells us that this is *before John the Baptist was imprisoned*. So again, it's good to keep in mind there's no place in John's Gospel where he refers to himself by name. So anytime there's a reference to John, it's always John the Baptist. So, when you read the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—what you find is the public ministry of Jesus basically begins after the arrest of John the Baptist. John's gospel here is the only Gospel that tells us what was happening before John was arrested. So it's unique in John's Gospel. There was a period of time where John the Baptist and Jesus, as partners in ministry, a short distance away from one another, were baptizing crowds that just came out to be identified with this movement of repentance. Verse 25:

**Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification.**

The word **discussion** there is far too mild. It wasn't a discussion. The Greek word means a *disagreement*; it was a *conflict*. So, there's **a Jew**. Some people think it's possible that was Nicodemus, perhaps still trying to figure this thing out. It's possible; there's no way to know. But this Jew comes and there's a pretty heated conversation around the concept of **purification**. It's likely that somewhere in that conversation, this Jew said something to the effect, "If John the Baptist is so great, how come his crowds are diminishing, and Jesus' crowds are growing?" which sets off his disciples. Verse 26:

**And they came to John and they 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."**

So the disciples of John the Baptist see John's crowds diminishing and Jesus' crowds growing, and they have a problem with this. Perhaps they have found some level of identity in serving John, or being disciples of John the Baptist. All these crowds are coming out; John has become somewhat of a celebrity. But now his influence is diminishing, and Jesus' is growing. It's interesting, they don't even call Jesus by name. They just refer to Him as **He who was with you**, and now everybody's going to Him. You can just hear it in their words in verse 27:

**John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' 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. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease."**

(Vs. 27-30)

John's response is very important. In verse 27, what he's saying is he clearly understands his call. What John is doing is a *call from God*, and his responsibility is *to be faithful*. It's to be obedient, but nothing of significance could happen *unless it came from God*. Now we have kind of this unique inside information with John the Baptist, because the Synoptic Gospels tell us that the angel Gabriel actually came to John the Baptist's father Zacharias, who was a priest, and told him what John's call would be. So John has clarity from the beginning of why he was created—on purpose for a purpose. "This is your mission; this is your assignment." That's what John is referring to. There is a clear understanding, "This is my call." He tells them, "I've told you from the beginning, I am not the Christ." Then he goes on and uses a wonderful illustration, that again, is about a wedding and the wedding feast. Essentially what he says is the bride belongs to the groom. The bride does not belong

to the groom's friend, what we would refer to as the best man. He understands the responsibility of the best man is to do everything in his power to listen for the voice of the groom, and do whatever's necessary to make the wedding feast as good as it possibly could be. And he finds great joy in serving the groom. He understands, the bride does not belong to him. The bride belongs to the groom.

Now, over the years, I've done a lot of weddings. I'm over 300 weddings; that's a lot of weddings! And I understand that the point of a wedding is not about me. I've been to weddings where it's more about the preacher than the couple. It's not about me; it's about the couple. One of the first conversations I have with the couple is, "This isn't my wedding; this is your wedding. You tell me what you want." And it's my job to do my best to make it happen. Now weddings and wedding rehearsals, they're kind of strange animals. (*laughter*) And every once in a while, there's a friend or a family member who has lots of opinions and ideas about how the wedding should go. And sometimes I have to remind these people, "This isn't your wedding." I've actually had to walk some people back down from the stage and say, "You need to sit down; this isn't your wedding." (*laughter*) I have a high level of commitment to the bride and groom. "You tell me what you want, and I'll do everything I can to make sure that happens." When the bride and groom are in focus, there is a reminder, this is a beautiful picture of the relationship between Christ and His church, and ultimately that's what it's all about. It's important for someone like me, who tends to be up front on the stage, to remember this isn't about me. I'm not the groom. I'm a friend of the groom, and my calling is to do everything possible to make the wedding feast as wonderful as it can be. I just want to be obedient. I just want to be faithful, but I can't ever forget this is not about me.

This is not my church; it never has been. We also understand we're not the only church in town. Lincoln is blessed with many wonderful churches. It's why, every single week we pray for them. They're not competitors; they're partners in ministry. We're friends of the groom, and we have a calling to do everything possible to make the wedding feast as wonderful as it could possibly be. I wonder sometimes how many of our seminary graduates graduate with a dream of being the next celebrity preacher...of being the next celebrity author...the next great Christian musician, and somewhere in there we lose sight of the fact, "Wait a minute; I'm not the groom. I'm just a friend of the groom." **He must increase; I must decrease.** We can't ever forget our calling. But that's true of every single one of us in the room. Every single person that's trusted Christ as Savior, "You have a high and holy calling, and your calling is just as high and holy as mine is." But you have to remember, ultimately it's not about you. You're just a friend of the groom. It's about the groom. Your job is to do everything possible to make the wedding feast as wonderful as it can be.

Over my thirty plus years in ministry, one of the things I've learned is that people get pretty possessive about their ministry. Whatever it is, "Wait a minute, that's *my* ministry." "That's *my* small group." "That's *my* idea." "That's *my* class." "That's *my* disciple." "It's *my* ministry." One of the things that's necessary for a church to continue to grow and flourish is, there are certain ministries that have run their course, and they need to gently be closed down in order that new fresh ministries might rise up. But always the biggest problem with that are the people involved. "Wait a minute, that's *my* ministry. You can't touch *my* ministry." And sometimes we lose sight of the fact this isn't about us. I can't get my identity; I can't get my significance out of my ministry, but rather I need to remember, I'm not the groom. I'm just a friend of the groom, and my job is to be faithful and obedient. One of the challenges when you are faithful and obedient and God blesses, is there's a tendency to get some applause from that, and applause can become intoxicating. And pretty soon you find your identity in what you do, and then you become possessive and you forget what your calling actually is. So, we're all in this together. And John has a lot to say to us, reminding us that He must increase; we must decrease.

Now starting in verse 31, there's a lot of conversation as to whether this is John the Baptist continuing to speak, or whether this is now John, the writer of the Gospel, summarizing the chapter. The problem is the Greek language doesn't have quotation marks, so it's always a judgment call. So, you have something similar earlier in chapter three, starting in verse 16 through verse 21. There's a lot of discussion as to whether that is Jesus continuing to speak, or just John, summarizing some of what Jesus said. I think biblical scholars are pretty much divided—feels about 50/50—as to whether that portion is Jesus or John. It doesn't change the meaning of the text, but it's hard to figure out. I would say that when you get to verses 31 through 36, while there's discussion around this portion, the overwhelming majority of scholars think it's John, the writer of the Gospel, summarizing the chapter. If that's true, then verse 30 would be the last recorded words of John the Baptist in John's gospel. The last thing he is recorded to say is, *"I must decrease; He must increase."* Starting then in verse 31:

**"He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all."**

Essentially what he just said is, "People from the earth talk about things of the earth. That's what we know." But someone that is from above, He is above all because He is from heaven, and He can speak of things that are in heaven. Verse 32:

**"What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony."**

This is not a new conversation. In John chapter one, verses 1 through 3, we learned that, *"In the beginning was the Word."* That's the second member of the Trinity: Jesus, the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, who took on human flesh and became a man. At the end of chapter one, Jesus identified himself as the fulfillment of Jacob's ladder, the connection between heaven and earth. In the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus said, "Nicodemus, people on earth don't ascend into heaven to find out what's true, but rather One who is in heaven descends to earth to tell you what's true." Well, that's what he just said. How do we know what's true about God? Answer: God descended from heaven, took on human flesh, and has explained to people, "This is what's true about God and His salvation." The problem is: people won't listen.

Now we already had this in chapter one, *"He came to His own, but his own received Him not."* Sometimes I hear people say today, "If God is real, why doesn't God just show up, make Himself known, do some miracles in the street, and everyone would believe?" To which I respond, "He did...*He did!* He *did* take on human flesh. He *did* walk on this earth. He *did* do miracles as signs. He *did* tell people that He was God and came to tell them what is true about God and His salvation. The problem is: *"People won't listen!"* It's naive to think that if God just did that, everyone would believe. He did do that; they didn't believe. Why? He told us that in the passage we studied last week: *because people prefer darkness*. Why? *Because their deeds are evil*. People do not want their rats exposed, so they prefer the darkness to the light. Jesus exposes our sin. It's a necessary step to recognize our need for a savior. But if people don't want their rats exposed, they prefer the darkness. That's not an intellect problem; that's a heart problem. People *choose* not to believe. Verse 33:

**He who has received His testimony [meaning they believe] has set his seal to *this*, that God is true. [We'd probably say God tells the truth.]**

But to those who do receive Him, to those who do *choose* to believe, they *set their seal to this belief*. Now the concept of a **seal** is going back to first century Roman culture and a wax seal. In first century Rome, a lot of people were illiterate, but even those who could not read understood a seal. A wax seal

identified ownership or possession of something, usually marked with a ring or something else to say, “This belongs to me.” What John is saying is, “There are those who choose to believe God tells the truth and they put their seal to it.” It's their way of saying, “I take possession of this. I own it; count me in.” That's what he's saying there. Verse 34,

**For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.**

We learned at the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is the *Word*. He speaks for God, “*and the Word became flesh.*” What that verse is saying is that God the Father gives the Spirit to Jesus. Verse 34 is not a reference to God giving *us* His Spirit. It's a reference to the fact that God the Father gave God the Son the Spirit of God, **without measure**. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God would come upon people in a limited fashion in order to accomplish something, and then would depart. If you remember, John the Baptist said the identifying mark that this is the Messiah, is the Spirit of God would descend on Him and *would remain, full measure*. So, what you have in this text is God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit—all hands on deck—in order to accomplish the salvation of sinful men and women. Verse 35:

**“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”** (Vs. 35-36)

It's interesting to note that he says when you choose not to believe, he identifies it as *disobedience*. You're choosing to disobey God when you choose not to believe the truth. **He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.**

We had this last week. The judgment of God is not something that someday will happen. While that is true, we are already under the judgment of God. We are already judged; we're already condemned. We're already under the wrath of God. That's why Jesus came to save us. Salvation makes no sense if there's not something you need to be saved from. It's not something someday; it's *now*. And it's that judgment, it's that condemnation, it's that wrath that separates us from God, which is what creates that longing deep in people's souls. Deep within people there's this sense in which something is missing, something is wrong. There's got to be something more than this. And people try to satisfy and fill that emptiness with everything imaginable in this world. But it just leaves people disappointed and despairing again and again and again.

I know people in America struggle with the concept of God's wrath. We want to convince ourselves that God is just a God of love, and pretend that there's no such thing as His judgment or His wrath. People would even suggest that wrath is inconsistent with a God of love, to which I would say, “That's exactly backwards.” It is because God is a God of love that God has wrath. If there's someone I deeply love, and someone does great harm to them, that makes me angry. Why does it make me angry? Because I love that person. If someone could do harm to someone and it doesn't make me angry, that's not love, that's indifference. And indifference goes with hate. It's because sin has done so much damage to people God loves, that God has wrath. We are under God's judgment; we are under God's condemnation; we are under God's wrath apart from Christ. We talked about this last week from John 3:16, “...whosoever does not believe will perish.” But the first part of the verse, “*He who believes.*” John says in chapter 20, “*These things are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and in believing, you might have life*”.

He who believes in the Son has eternal life. Eternal life is not merely a duration of life; it is a quality of life. You have God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, all three members of the Trinity named in this text coming together to give life. It takes us back to the beginning of the story, the beginning of John's Gospel. *Before there was anything, there was God.* But God existed as God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit. All life originates in God. He is the author and originator of life. From eternity past, God the Father has delighted in His Son; His Son has delighted in the Spirit; the Spirit has delighted in the Father. They delight in one another; they celebrate one another. They love one another. Theologians have referred to this as the *dance of God*, the celebration of God that has gone on forever. Essentially what salvation is, is not merely a ticket to heaven. That's like thinking the point of marriage is a marriage license. How many Christians have their ticket to heaven, but that's as far as it goes? And there's still this emptiness, there's still this longing, there's still this dissatisfaction. We're still trying to fill up our lives with all kinds of stuff that just doesn't satisfy. We've failed to realize that what God is offering is an invitation to join the dance. It is filled with romance. This idea of a wedding feast with Jesus being the groom, His church is the bride. It's an invitation to a romantic dance with God forever. It's what we were made for. It's what our souls long for. And we're never going to be satisfied until we understand that and pursue that with all our hearts.

There are some of you here this morning, you're still trying to figure this out. It's still confusing to you; you're still not quite sure what we're talking about. I understand that, and I respect that. We're just really glad you're here, and we hope you continue to come. We'll keep talking about these things together. But there are others of you that have reached a point where you understand this is what you're missing. You understand this is what God says; this is what God offers. It's not through a bunch of religion. It's not through self-righteousness. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what you've done, doesn't matter what's been done to you. None of that is relevant. God offers you His salvation, freely as a gift, if you're simply willing to believe by faith. If you're willing to believe God tells the truth, that this is what God says, then, "I choose to put my wax seal on it, and I'm taking possession. I'm taking ownership." I'm saying, "I believe that; I'm in."

For some of you, why would you wait any longer? This morning God is inviting you to join the dance. It's what your soul longs for. Why would you not choose to do that this morning? I pray that you will, in the quietness of your own heart. All you have to do is tell God, "I believe it. I believe it; I'm in." Why not have this be the morning that you join the dance?

*Our Father we're so thankful when we were lost in our sin with no hope, You sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. There's nobody in this room that has sinned too much, that's too far gone, that is somehow unredeemable. Lord, we're all sinners and misfits and losers, desperately in need of a savior. God, may this be the morning that some in the room make the decision to join the dance now and forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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**Opening Discussion**

1. Is there such a thing as absolute truth? Why or why not?
2. Where do people go to find support for what they believe in today's culture?
3. Where do you go to find truth? Why?

**Bible Study**

1. Do a quick review of what you have learned in John so far. What is the significance of the water to wine, the cleansing of the temple and the Nicodemus story?
2. Read John 3:22-31. What is the primary issue that is presented in the text? What is John's response?
3. How might a similar problem arise today? What happens when we forget that we're just the "best man" at the wedding feast and start acting like we're the groom?
4. Compare I Corinthians 1:10-17. How might a similar dynamic play out in churches today?
5. What do we all need to remember about whatever it is that God calls us to?
6. Read John 3:31-36. What is the argument John is making here? How does this align with what John has said in 1:1-3, 51; 3:13?

