

John 3 (plus John 4:1-3)

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In John 1:13 the apostle said that those who became children of God had been born of God. John 3 elaborates on that teaching as it tells of the visit from Nicodemus. This chapter is perhaps the most familiar part of the entire Gospel, yet it contains a number of verses, such as 22-35, that have been neglected. It is regrettable that the beginning of John 3 suffers from a chapter break that keeps people from reading it as closely tied to 2:23-25. John 3 also promotes simple faith in Christ as the needed response to the gospel, resulting in eternal life. It also warns of unbelief.

John the author did not always indicate when he was no longer quoting Jesus or John the Baptist, and when he was adding his own comments. I think this chapter switches twice from historical narrative to comments added by the apostle.

- 3:1-15 Nicodemus visits Jesus – **narrative**
- 3:16-21 An elaboration by the apostle – **comment**
- 3:22-30 John the Baptist's declining ministry – **narrative**
- 3:31-36 An elaboration by the apostle – **comment**

Nothing about Nicodemus is mentioned in the Synoptics. The material about Jesus baptizing more people than John is also unique to this Gospel. The reaction by the Baptist to the changed situation, in which he would have less influence and a smaller following, shows what a humble man he was. Though the second part of John 3 is not a continuation of the Nicodemus narrative, the apostle does have a purpose in putting them together. In both parts he makes believing in Christ a matter of urgency. He drew attention to faith in chapter 2, in both parts of John 3, and again by examples of people believing in chapter 4. Thus the urgent evangelistic appeal continues. He did more than merely say people need to believe in Christ; throughout this Gospel he gave examples of both faith and unbelief.

John 3 is rich in doctrine. It emphasizes the necessity of the Spirit's work in hearts that otherwise would never believe. Apart from God's intervention, no one would accept the gospel (v.32). This is a truth greatly neglected in our time; it needs to be emphasized again. John 3 mentions Jesus' coming death on the cross without using the word *crucify*, and John adds that it is the Father's love that prompted Him to give His Only Begotten Son. The entire Trinity appears here.

3:1,2 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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."

3:1,2 2:25 ends by mentioning *man* twice. For 3:1 to begin with "there was a man ..." maintains the thought of the end of chapter 2. John could have written, "There was a Pharisee..." but he wrote, "*There was a man of the Pharisees...*". Jesus "*needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man*" (2:25). So of course He knew what was in Nicodemus too as the conversation reveals. The theme of Jesus knowing people's hearts in 1:47,48 continues in chapter 2, is seen here in chapter 3 with Nicodemus, and again with the Samaritan woman in 4:16-19. Some think Nicodemus is an example of a man to whom the Lord did not entrust Himself. I think the text shows that Jesus did open up to Him. Yet all Nicodemus had to form his view of Christ was the signs in 2:23. This Gospel never says explicitly that Nicodemus believed.

3:2 Many think Nicodemus' visit at night was so that he would not be seen. The Scripture does not say. I personally think that was not the reason. To visit Jesus at night would give a much longer uninterrupted opportunity to talk. Perhaps it was a measure of his seriousness, not cowardice. It is unclear whether Nicodemus came alone. In this verse he said "we know" and in v.7 Jesus spoke to him with both singular and plural pronouns. Nicodemus could say *we* and be speaking of others with similar thoughts of Christ who were not present. Nicodemus stated that Jesus was associated with the true God of Israel. This is less than saying He is the Messiah. He spoke to Christ knowing something about Him, but looking for more.

How do we understand Nicodemus? As a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus was a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Jesus spoke of him as “the teacher of Israel” (v.10), so he was a very prominent man. He appears again in 7:50 and 19:39. It is my opinion that Nicodemus’ later actions show that he became a believer in Christ. He defended Jesus in 7:45-52, and he cared for the body of Jesus in 19:38-40 after the crucifixion. Jesus had been murdered by Nicodemus’ colleagues on the Sanhedrin. By assisting Joseph of Arimathea in taking Jesus’ body from the cross for burial, he showed he was not in agreement with them.

In John 3, Nicodemus gives no indication of being a believer. In fact, the record shows he was ignorant of things it was his duty to know. The last word in this chapter about him is that he did not believe (v.12). Yet he never contradicted Christ. I conclude that he spoke sincerely when he said that God was with Christ. He called Jesus “Rabbi,” a term of respect for Him, undoubtedly sincere. He could not call Jesus “Lord,” because at that time He did not know that. When the Lord scolded him for not understanding the Scriptures, there is no recorded negative reaction. A proud man would not accept that kind of reproof from a young Rabbi. With those supposed believers in 2:24 the Lord did not respond to them as if they were true believers. On the other hand, with Nicodemus Jesus gave more than mere explanations. He went much further by stating that He is the Son of Man. He also revealed to Nicodemus that He must go to the cross (v.14) and that those who believe in Him will have eternal life (v.15). The Lord responded to him with remarkable openness.

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

3:3 Conversations in all the Gospels are very condensed. The apostles give brief summaries. Here in Jesus’ reply there is a mention of the kingdom of God. It would not be surprising if Nicodemus had mentioned God’s kingdom to Jesus. Very likely he felt confident of being part of God’s future kingdom. Pharisees did not think of themselves as estranged from God. He had stated what he could “see” about Jesus. Then came Jesus’ penetrating reply to a high-ranking religious leader. He told the man noted for insight that a man cannot even *see* God’s kingdom unless he has been born from above. This statement applied to Nicodemus too. Jesus was showing that this is where one gets started. To miss this is to miss everything. Surely this is not what Nicodemus expected to hear, and in my opinion it reveals his great seriousness that he remained for all that followed. It seems Nicodemus came to the Light with no evident tendency to run from it. (See 3:20,21).

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." This very condensed statement:

- begins with *“truly, truly”*. This was one way that Jesus made an especially strong emphasis on something He said.
- describes a birth, which has to do with the very existence of a person. Without birth, none of us are anything. Without this spiritual birth no one is in God’s kingdom.
- is a birth from a different source. It is *from above*. See the box below “Born again.” V.5 adds that it is a cleansing birth given by the Holy Spirit.
- means a person *cannot* see the kingdom, thus he has no ability or possibility to enter on his own. See Appendix 3A “The Cannots and the New Birth”.
- In v.7 Jesus added that you *must* be born from above. Thus He taught it is essential to seeing the kingdom of God; apart from it there is no genuine knowledge of or experience of any life with the Lord.

3:4-5 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Born Again This expression has become part of our vocabulary. The Greek word often translated “again” in 3:3,7 is *anōthen* (ἀνωθεν). The other legitimate translation is “from above”. When Nicodemus said a man cannot enter his mother’s womb and so be born a second time, he responded without grasping what Jesus meant. The confusion of Nicodemus should not decide for us the meaning of the word. Christ did not mean another birth of the same kind, or a second one.

John uses *anōthen* in 3:31; where it means “from above”, “*He who comes from above is above all*”. In 19:11 *anōthen* appears again: Pilate could have no authority unless it had been given *from above*. “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). The Greek word for “*from top*” is the same word. It does not mean *again* or *a second time*. While “born again” in 3:3,7 is very familiar, **born from above** more clearly means from God. In vv. 5,8 Jesus is more specific when He taught that this new birth is by the Holy Spirit. In 1:13, those who receive Christ have been born of no other cause. The only explanation was that they had been “born of God.” Jesus told Nicodemus he needed a birth directly from God Himself.

3:4,5 Nicodemus’ question shows he misunderstood what kind of birth Jesus had in mind. He knew another physical birth was impossible. The Scriptures never taught such a thing. He expected Jesus to agree with him. So Jesus explained what He did mean, a birth of water and spirit. (In Greek, the earliest manuscripts had no upper and lower case letters. I think *water* refers to the Spirit.) Some wonder if Jesus meant a birth of two kinds – the one of water is physical and the other is of the Spirit. In v.10 Jesus admonished Nicodemus that as a religious teacher in Israel this should not have been a surprise to him. The water/spirit birth was revealed in the OT. Nicodemus was a recognized expert in the Scriptures but did not know this.

Old Testament Promises of the Spirit The Spirit was active in creation (Genesis 1:2). It should be no surprise that He is active in the new creation. Scripture had many rituals of cleansing with water, as in Numbers 19. In Psalm 51:10 David spoke of the cleansing of the heart. The prophets emphasize a future work of the Spirit in terms of cleansing. The Lord was the fountain of living waters (Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13) and His Spirit would be poured out like water on dry ground (Isaiah 32:15; 44:3-5; Joel 2:28,29). The most emphatic prophecy is Ezekiel 36:25-29. God will sprinkle clean water on them to cleanse them, give a new heart, and remove their hardness of heart. He promised, “*I will put my Spirit within you.*” This is the kind of transformation needed so a person can enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus had read Ezekiel’s prophecy but did not recognize this truth when he heard it from Jesus.

Is It by Water Baptism? Was Jesus saying we enter the kingdom by baptism? If we must be born of water and the Spirit, does God use baptism as the means of bringing us in? I offer the following reasons for saying No.

1. Jesus was speaking of one thing, not two. The birth was not by water and then also by something different, namely a birth by the Spirit. One preposition in Greek covers both nouns. Jesus did not say, “*of water and of the Spirit.*” The texts in the box above Old Testament Promises of the Spirit show that water refers to the Spirit’s cleansing work. The Spirit’s work is not ritual but salvation itself. The person who has not been baptized with water but has been born of the Spirit already has the cleansing transformation.

2. If the Apostle John intended to tell us that we are saved by means of water baptism, he never refers to it in any other part of this Gospel. He always stresses believing.

3. We are not saved by baptism but by the cleansing that baptism points to by means of washing by water. It points to, but is not the same as, a change of heart. External washing and a spiritual cleansing within are different. Sadly, in the history of the church there has often been confusion between the sign (water baptism done by men) and the reality (a new heart given by God). For example, we all know the difference between a photograph of and the reality of a friend.

4. In Titus 3:5 there are two interpretations: **a)** regeneration is the *spiritual* washing intended, or **b)** *external* washing in the sacrament of baptism brings regeneration.

The first view(a) says that the Spirit’s internal work is the cleansing that renews or transforms. The second view is that the external washing with water brings about the new birth (or regeneration). The Bible never teaches that we are changed by mere water. To show the limitation of his ministry, John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11 contrasted his baptizing with water (a ritual) with Jesus’ baptizing with the Spirit and fire. Water applied to our skin makes no permanent change, but fire does (Luke 3:16). A life changed from slavery to sin, brought by the power of the Spirit, is what it means to be born from above. Those who advocate salvation by means of a ritual turn the faith of sinners away from the Savior Who gives the Spirit of life. This faith is then a false dependence on a ritual, or the church that gives it, or the one performing it.

3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:6 The Lord in this verse applies the principle found in all of life: nothing can produce a life different from itself. Humans bear humans, and cats have kittens. Flesh is simply a word here for human life, as in 1:14. Flesh produces its own human flesh and blood, never another kind. So it is with the new birth. Only the Spirit can produce His kind of life. Nicodemus raised the question about a second *human* birth. Jesus was speaking about a birth from the Spirit. Thus the new life has in it the quality of God's holy life. The birth from above does not mean we are born to be God, but we are born to be godly – God-like in a moral sense. In 2 Peter 1:4, to be a “partaker of the divine nature” is to have a moral transformation. That means we will love what He loves and hate what He hates. It means His word is welcome in our heart, His promises are trusted, His commandments obeyed, and His truth believed. It means we are made to love and worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human flesh can never produce such a result, and the Holy Spirit cannot fail to produce any other kind of life.

3:7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

3:7 If Nicodemus, as an expert in Scripture, really knew what the Lord had promised for the Messianic day, he would not be surprised that the Lord would actually bring about the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) He had promised. (See above “Old Testament Promises of the Spirit.”) Deuteronomy 29:4 was a solemn word about the human condition, “*But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.*” God then promised it would not stay that way. On the same day as those words, the Lord said, “*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*” (Deuteronomy 30:6). Genuine spiritual life is not a new concept. Nicodemus should not have marveled to hear a truth already revealed in the Old Testament. Jesus was simply teaching a truth that had been there in the OT for centuries.

Many suppose that Jesus' word, “You must be born again” is an imperative. If it were, He would be telling Nicodemus what to do. The words sound like an order, such as “You must be out of here in five minutes.” Though the words are extremely serious, they are not an imperative. Jesus was saying it is necessary that one be born from above. If a teacher says, “You must carry oxygen with you to live on the moon,” he is not giving an order; he is stating a vital necessity.

Controversy about Covenant Baptism Some teachers lately are arguing that what one needs to enter the kingdom is to be in covenant with the Lord, and that we are in covenant with Him when we are baptized with water. They neglect the necessity of conversion. Jesus did not teach that we need to be in covenant in order to enter the kingdom, but that a change of heart is needed. When born from above, one believes in Christ and for that reason is accepted as a child of God (1:12). This believing is generated by God (1:13). It is the spiritual reality which brings us into a true covenantal relation to our God. Since we judge ourselves by the results of the new birth, we should be very diligent whether we have genuine faith in Christ (2 Peter 1:10, 1Corinthians 11:28,32). True faith always results in love and obedience to God (14:15,21). Many have been in covenant with the Lord externally by circumcision or baptism, and yet they have rejected the God they once professed as their own. Such souls are an apostate Esau or Judas, lacking new life from above.

3:8 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."

3:8 The Analogy of Wind for the Spirit In Greek the same word is used for spirit, breath, and wind. Thus the movement of the wind is an analogy for the unseen and unpredictable activity of the Holy Spirit. We cannot predict the way paper may be blown about by the wind. Jesus was teaching that the movement of the Spirit to bring life to sinners is not predictable to us. Which ones will be born of God? The Father chooses (1Thessalonians 1:4); the Son chooses (5:21); and the Spirit moves where and when He wishes, saving those He chooses to save. Since the will of each Person in the Trinity is the salvation of the same sinners, this shows the true unity of God. The salvation of the sinner begins in the will of God, not in the will of the sinner.

More on the New Birth John 3 does not give us all the teaching in the Bible on this subject. Other Scriptures teach us that we are born by hearing the word, the gospel. Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17), but hearing is not possible for those who cannot hear (8:43), unless God intervenes to change our hearts. Not to all individuals but to His own, God has given the blessing of knowing the secrets of the kingdom (Matthew 13:11). Those not born from above cannot even see (3:3). Their hearts are dull (Matthew 13:15), but “*Blessed are your ears for they hear*” (Matthew 13:16). “*Of his own will he [God] brought us forth by the word of truth ...*” James 1:18. God causes this new birth (1 Peter 1:3) by His word (1 Peter 1:23-25). In 1 Peter 1:3 & 23 the Greek verb does mean born *again*. Except for Titus 3:5, the Bible does not use the word *regeneration* to describe the new birth. In later theology regeneration has become a commonly used word to express the Spirit’s creation of spiritual life.

3:9-13 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:9-13 The Certainty of Jesus’ Knowledge The Lord had been explaining the basics: a new birth is necessary; without it we cannot see; it is of the Spirit; it comes from the sovereign initiative of God. These things are all found in the Old Testament. Nicodemus knew from Jesus’ miracles that God was with Him (3:2), but after hearing Christ he was puzzled (v.9). The Lord admonished him for his dullness. Even though Nicodemus was a prominent clergyman in Israel, this essential truth of salvation was strange to him. He did not know about it and had not experienced it.

In v.11 the prophetic ministry of Christ is evident. He speaks, He knows what He is saying and knows it is truth. He did not invent His message. He was a witness sent by the Father to speak all that the Father had said. The notion that “we mainly witness by our life” is a twisted view of what witness means. Here and elsewhere Jesus witnessed by what He said. Proper living never replaces witness; it supports it and is distinguished from it.

Nicodemus had trouble understanding (vv.4,9). He had another problem; he did not believe. Not accepting the things of God is natural for the “natural man” (1 Corinthians 2:14). No one can believe what he does not understand, and no one has any interest to trust in the Lord if he has not been born from above. The new birth opens the heart and mind to God, but at this point Nicodemus still did not understand his problem. He thought of himself as a God-fearing Jew. He felt he was surely a citizen of God’s future kingdom, but since he had not been born of God (1:13), he had no part in it. Nicodemus was not receiving the testimony Jesus had been giving him. The man who supposedly taught others the Word of God did not receive it even when God was speaking His word to Him face to face.

It is puzzling to read that Jesus spoke of “earthly things”. This does not refer to earthly things as opposed to “things above” as in Colossians 3:1,2. The Lord had spoken of being born from above, so how could He call that something within the realm of “earthly things”? They were not earthly in their *source*, because Jesus witnessed only to what He had received from above (8:26,27). I think the *earthly things* of v.12 are simply what God had previously revealed to men on earth in Scripture. Nicodemus may have been looking for additional things, “hidden things” from this new Prophet Jesus. Perhaps that is what Christ spoke of as “heavenly things” in v.12 – the secrets of God not revealed to man. (We are often sinfully eager to know what God has withheld from us! Note Deuteronomy 29:29.) Jesus spoke of things that had been the possession of God’s people on earth for centuries, yet Nicodemus had not accepted the word already given through Israel’s prophets (Luke 12:48). Nicodemus would not receive more from God if he refused what was already revealed in Scripture (Matthew 13:12).

3:13 John 3 does not report whether Nicodemus asked more about who Jesus was. He probably wondered when the young man (Jesus) spoke with great authority to the older master. (Note Matthew 7:28,29 and 1Timothy 4:12.) Thus there is another reason why Nicodemus should believe. First he had the Scriptures; they came indirectly from God through human writers He had chosen. On this night, the majestic Son of Man from heaven was teaching him directly. No one has ever gone to heaven to bring back any information. The One with Nicodemus that night was the One from heaven. He knew what He was talking about and where He had come from (8:14).

Either Jesus was the exalted Son of Man He claimed to be, or He was deceitful. Nicodemus heard Jesus claim that He had descended from heaven. Good Pharisees recoiled in disgust when mere men claimed to be God. They were sensitive to blasphemy, a charge others often laid on Christ (10:33; Matthew 26:65). The fact that all we see of Nicodemus after this is openly supportive of Christ makes me conclude that Nicodemus eventually became a true believer. I hope so, and if so, then Nicodemus at some point was *born from above*.

3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:14,15 What follows is more than evangelism. It is an unusual degree of opening up to Nicodemus. First, it is filled with gospel. The Lord spoke of His coming death. Whether Nicodemus grasped immediately that being “lifted up” was a reference to the cross, I cannot say. It is unbelievable that he would hear that from Christ and not see the meaning later when the crucifixion happened. Here Jesus connects the gospel action of God (His sacrifice) with the gospel response of faith. Jesus was lifted up *so that* all might receive by believing. Thus if there was no lifting up, there is no gospel for faith to rest on. In the history of Israel the Lord chose that Moses should erect a bronze snake on a high pole for people to look to when bitten (Numbers 21:4-9). When they looked they were healed. This was a demonstration of a very simple faith, and also of God making a promise to faith. It prepared for a future day, known only to God, when the Son of Man would be erected in shame and death, bringing life to all who believe in Him. Those in the wilderness who looked in faith received longer life but not eternal life. Later they died. Those who trust in Christ lifted up on the cross gain eternal life.

Jesus said more than this. Just as He declared in 3:7 that men *must* be born from above, He told Nicodemus that He Himself *must* be lifted up. The cross is not one possible way among others whereby God could save man. Jesus’ death met an unchangeable requirement of God. God declared death for sin (Genesis 2:16,17). The punishment of sin is not optional but necessary for God’s glory. His forgiveness involves more than canceling a penalty for sin. He transferred that penalty to our Mediator. It was *necessary* for a righteous Substitute to die so that God’s ancient threat of death would be fulfilled for the sinner. Jesus took the sinner’s guilt and sentence of death. The gospel is that God has graciously acted to satisfy His own justice. He did not suspend His justice; He fulfilled it. Thus, Jesus did not merely say He would die some day; He was saying He *must* be lifted up.

“Lifted up” in the Gospel of John This verb appears four times: 3:14; 8:28; 12:32 & 34. It always has refers to Christ being lifted up on the cross. This exaltation has the sense of either being lifted up in shame or lifted up in glory. By being lifted up He would not only die, He would be effective to draw all to Himself (12:32), the devil would be defeated (12:31), and the Father glorified (12:28). By that lifting up, men would learn Who He is, and all of His teaching would be vindicated (8:28). John combines *lifted up* on the cross with the sense of being raised from the dead. The One lifted up in death will be lifted up in glory. In Isaiah 52:13 the same Greek verb is used: “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and **lifted up**, and shall be exalted.” Because Christ in perfect submission to the Father was lifted up on the cross, He has been highly exalted by His Father. On the day when God makes Jesus’ glory to be universally recognized, our Lord will be exalted in the eyes of all intelligent life (Philippians 2:5-11).

A Summary of 3:1-15 The new birth is better expressed as being *born from above*, rather than the more common “born again”. It is a birth generated by the Spirit of God. Without this necessary transformation, no one can enter the kingdom of God. We become children of God by believing (1:12), but being born from God is the change of heart that enables us to believe. The new birth is what God does *in our experience*. The sacrifice of Christ lifted up on the cross *outside our experience* is the basis of forgiveness. These truths are found in the Old

Testament. When the great Son of Man descended from heaven, saying “truly, truly,” He emphasized the great importance of these things. The noted Pharisee teacher in Jerusalem had come looking for something from Jesus the young miracle worker from Galilee. The theologian came away from his visit corrected, taught, admonished, puzzled, and even accused of unbelief. Nevertheless, Nicodemus stayed and listened. Who knows how the Holy Spirit may have been humbling him? If he came at night from fear of the opinions of others (not my view), he later stood up to abuse with great courage (7:48-52). For Christ to share with this man the first recorded words indicating His death by crucifixion is a great surprise. When the Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman and the man born blind telling them Who He was (4:25,26; 9:35-37), He was revealing the kinds of things usually reserved for His disciples (Matthew 16:13-17). “*For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away*” (Matthew 13:12). Jesus taught Nicodemus more like a friend than a servant (15:15).

Comments Added by the Apostle – John 3:16-21

In the times the apostles wrote, writers did not use quotation marks. Then how can we know whether v.16 is a continuation of the narrative of Nicodemus famous visit? Probably Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus till the end of v.15. It was typical for Christ to refer to Himself as the Son of Man (v.14), and v.15 finishes that sentence. Christ usually did not speak in the way 3:16 does. In John He usually did not speak of His Father as “God,” but as “My Father,” “the One Who sent Me,” or similar language. The “only-Begotten” in v.16 is a description made not by Him but about Him in the Prologue. The Lord said He would teach His apostles more after His ascension (14:26; 16:13). That is probably why John later added a theological elaboration. Thus I conclude that John added vv.16-21 as his knowledge of God’s truth had grown. (See 16:12-15.)

John wrote by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, thus his comments here are as much the Word of God as the words that come from the lips of Jesus. God does not speak on two levels – infallibly in Christ and then in a lesser quality by His apostles. As an evangelist, John probably wrote this Gospel after years of gospel preaching. He often repeated the simple words Jesus used with Nicodemus *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*” (3:15). In v.16 John enlarged on vv.14 & 15. God **1)** has given His Son (to be lifted up), and **2)** why He did it (He loved), **3)** in order to bring about such a gracious result (eternal life), **4)** through such a simple response (believing in Him), **5)** in order to deliver from such a peril (to perish). The gospel promise made by God is received by sinners believing in God’s Son. No wonder this is the most famous verse in the Bible.

However, not all believe (1:11). This section speaks of the plight of unbelievers as it warns of condemnation. Why do so many not believe? What makes them run away from Christ and His gospel? John 3:16-21 speaks of both receiving and rejecting. Rejecters of Christ in their unchanged hearts hate the light. In this chapter, John wrote first of a new birth 3:1-8. With a changed heart men will believe. Then he follows by showing the evil of a heart not transformed (3:18-21).

3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

3:16 Christians find 3:16 very attractive. One reason is its profound simplicity. It is a statement that says so much, yet is so simple and clear it is one of the first verses in the Bible Christians want their children to memorize. It speaks of love – not in the abstract, but love that acted. It catches the great moral surprise that God could ever love a world so evil. It surprises us with grace that He would give His Son for our salvation. It then follows such loftiness by making the very simple demand of faith in Christ. Then, finally, it connects all eternity – good or horrid – to that simple response.

3:16 is such a well-designed statement. For all of us born since the time of Christ, there are four time periods related to salvation. 3:16 spans from eternity to eternity and gives them in order:

1. Before time, before the world began (eternity past)
2. The sending of God’s Son into the world in human history
3. Our own lifetime during which we believe in Christ
4. The eternity ahead of us in which eternal life never ends

Eternity Past	The Coming of Christ	Our Lifetime	Eternity Future
God loved in the past	That He gave His Only Begotten Son	That whoever believes now	Will never perish but will have everlasting life
There was no time in human history when God began to love the world He had decided to save. That love preceded creation (Ephesians 1:4). There was an eternal agreement that Jesus would be the sacrifice (John 17:4,5).	There was a time in human history when Jesus came (Galatians 4:4). On a certain day He appeared (Luke 2:11), sent by the Father (10:36). He was coming (1:9), then was in the world (1:10) and came to His own (1:11).	Believing in Christ happens in our history, even though believers were chosen before creation, and even though they were redeemed by the blood of Christ shed 2000 years ago (Luke 1:68). We believe now to be saved forever (Acts 16:31).	The life promised is secure (5:24; 10:28). The promise is stated both ways: (negatively) <i>will never perish</i> , and (positively) <i>will have everlasting life</i> . There is no danger in the Judgment Day (5:24) for the believer. We are assured of the presence of Christ (17:24).

The Apostle John aimed for a brief yet comprehensive statement. As a preacher of the gospel, he had many opportunities to quote what Jesus had said in vv.14,15. One might wonder in such a carefully composed gospel summary as 3:16 why John does not mention the death of Christ. V.14 had just mentioned Jesus' death, so when 3:16 says God *gave* His Son, we know from that context that the purpose of His giving was to send His Only Begotten to the cross.

Does God Love What He Tells Us Not to Love? A greater puzzle is how 3:16 can say that God loved the world when in 1 John 2:15,16 we are told: *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world.”* Both texts are from the pen of the Apostle John! In 3:16 the Lord loves a sinful humanity whose morals are repugnant to Him. He sent His Son not to condemn the world (3:17) but to save it. Thus God had in mind a world He would rescue, save, and transform (16:8). He does not approve of the world or retract His curse (see John 7:7). Salvation is motivated by love to save from evil. In 1 John 2 the apostle warns us against the attraction of the world, approving its ways, sharing its desires, joining it in its sin. God's love for us was, and Christ's death for us occurred while we were still guilty sinners (Romans 5:8). He died only for ungodly people (Romans 5:6). We believed and were justified while in an ungodly condition (Romans 4:5). It is not that we have improved so that God's wrath could be withdrawn from us. While we were not righteous (Romans 5:7) and still under His wrath because of our sin, God loved the world and through Christ saved us from the wrath we deserve (Romans 5:9).

Individual or Corporate? Note that 3:16 speaks both of individuals (whoever) and also of the larger group (the world). The scope of God's salvation is the world, not just Israel. Salvation is also corporate; it is not only the forgiveness of individuals. Throughout the NT, all believers were part of a corporate body, the church. God's goal for His world is a united redeemed humanity, an eventual united universe (Ephesians 1:10) composed only of redeemed men, holy angels who never sinned and a renewed physical creation (Romans 8:18-25). Those who do not repent are excluded (Revelation 21:7,8). God's new world, so different from the world of the evil one (1 John 5:18-21), will be an entirely new creation (Revelation 21:5). The church as a temple is one building composed of many stones. These are added one by one whenever anyone believes. *“As you [plural] come to him ... you yourselves like living stones [plural] are being built up as a spiritual house [a singular composite unity] ... whoever [singular] believes in Him [as in John 3:16!] will not be put to shame,”* (1 Peter 2:4-6).

The World God Loved Sometimes in the Bible the word “world” has the sense of geography – the earth God created. Since the present world (Galatians 1:4) or present age (1 Corinthians 1:20) will pass away (1 John 2:15-17), “world” may refer to time. It may also refer to the nations (Luke 12:30), as in the “kingdom of this world” (Revelation 11:15). John 1:10 uses it for both place and people. (The apostle John uses *world* more than any other NT writer.)

When we are warned not to be worldly (Titus 2:12), it is clear that there is a moral aspect to this word in the Bible. Since the world is sinful (John 16:8) and under the power of the devil (1 John 5:19), it needs a Savior (1 John 4:14; John 3:17). It is polluted (James 1:27) and under God’s judgment (1 Corinthians 11:32; Romans 3:19). Its rulers crucified the Lord of glory! (1 Corinthians 2:8), yet God sent Christ so that He could reconcile Himself to the world and the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19,20). The world is hostile to God and His people (Hebrews 11:38; James 4:4). It is in darkness needing light (Matthew 5:14; John 8:12).

Though believers are in the world, the word is sometimes used to distinguish it from them (Luke 12:30; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 17:9). We live in the world, but our life is not from it (John 17:15,16); our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

When John 3:16 says that God loved the world (the verb is in the past tense), it gives the motivation for His determination to give His Son. God does not approve the world. His love is for sinners before they believe. The emphasis John makes is that the world God has loved is evil and is under His wrath (3:36). It needs to be saved from sin (3:17). To meet that need He has acted in love by sending His Only Begotten Son to be lifted up to die (3:14). It is not necessary to suppose that John 3:16 means that God has loved each and every soul in the world in the same way. He has not acted to save every soul in the world. Jesus “*loved his own who were in the world*”, and “*loved them to the end*” (13:1). It would create a difference of purpose in the Father and the Son if we suppose that the Father loved all individuals in the same way but that Jesus specifically loved His own in a way that distinguished them from the rest of the world. In the end God will have a world that pleases Him and a world where all love Him in return (1 John 4:19). This is the world now being saved by the Son He sent – sent because God loved the world. He has not loved because we are good, but because He is good and gracious. Jesus did not pray for all the world (17:9). He had not decided to save every human being, but John shows that the world God loved is greater than Israel. In 4:42, Samaritans believed Christ was “*truly the Savior of the world,*” not because He had saved everyone, but because the Jewish Savior had saved them!

3:17 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.

3:17 “God *sent*” means the same as “God *gave*” in v.16. His purpose in the incarnation was not to condemn. Further condemnation would just be repetition. God had already condemned all of Adam’s descendents in Adam’s sin (Romans 5:12-19). The mission of Jesus was to save. The things Jesus will do in His Second Coming, such as judge all mankind (5:22,27-30), did not happen in His First Coming because the Father had sent Him to save. The gospel is that the Lord God Who had already condemned sinners, invites those under His holy wrath to come to Him for eternal life. He sincerely offers to them a full pardon.

3:18 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.

3:18 The way to have condemnation relieved is to believe in the Lord Jesus sent by the Father for this very purpose. Whoever believes will be condemned no longer (5:24). God has sent a “Condemnation Remover”, Christ! But whoever does not believe in Him continues under condemnation and adds to it by rejecting the provision God has made for its removal. Unbelievers: 1) were all condemned in Adam’s sin, 2) continue condemned for their own sins, and 3) are locked into their condemnation eternally by rejecting the divine pardon. To *perish* (v.16) is to have condemnation never removed. *Eternal life* is always combined with the immediate removal of condemnation (Romans 5:1 and 8:1). The one who refuses to believe rejects the majestic Son God has sent, His Only Begotten, the One Who came to make the Father known (1:18), the One Who is the

Way to Him (14:6). Rejecting Christ is rejecting God. Rejecting Christ means the one already condemned is disobeying God's gospel call to faith in Christ. As a result, he will face God the Judge in his sins (8:24), without hope (Ephesians 2:12), without a Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), and without a sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:26).

3:19-20 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

3:19-20 Since John's aim is to promote faith in Christ, he is very serious about unbelief. Here he explains it. (See 12:37-43.) The Light is Christ Who has appeared in the world (1:4,5). The Light has come (1:9). The reason men will not believe is within them. Their problem is not that Jesus did not do or show or say enough; the problem is in the human heart. We naturally love our sin and prefer it to righteousness. We hate exposure to what is right. We do not want to change even though God sent His Son into the world. Believing in Christ brings a change sinners do not want because they prefer darkness. (See 1:5.) To hate The Light is to hate Christ (8:12), as in 15:18-25. Unbelievers did not see in Christ the glory of God (1:14), but what they did see was reproof of their evil deeds (7:7). Thus man is very motivated to avoid Christ (6:35,36). He may pretend that it is not clear that God has created the world or sent His Son, etc., but his *real* reasons are moral – he hates the Light.

3:21 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."

3:21 Since God has sent His Son, the proper thing for anyone to do is to come to Him. The rejecter of Christ has his reasons why he does not want to. The converted man comes, not because he is good but that God would receive credit even for the sinner coming. This is true of his first act of faith and all the ones that follow. To hear of Christ and not believe is to be exposed to truth; to believe is to respond to it, and thus to do the truth. As in vv.19,20 it is *the* Light not merely light, so here it is not a general matter of facing a truth, but responding to *the* truth. The Apostle John often speaks of believing as accepting truth (18:37; 1 John 1:6-8; 2:4; 3:19; 2 John 1-4; 3 John:3,4). He says this in a very strong way in 3:33.

John 3:22-30

The apostle reports a controversy, which became an opportunity for John the Baptist to give a wonderful response about his Lord. Probably we have in these verses the last words from the Baptist before he was murdered. Often there will be more attention to a ritual than to the reality it was designed to signify. God has given external rituals, but men often make them the chief thing. Things like baptism and the Lord's Supper continue to be the subjects of great controversy. Some of John's disciples were envious at the increased interest being shown to Jesus. His disciples were baptizing more people than John the Baptizer! John knew his true role as a prophet and was delighted that public attention had moved from himself to Christ.

3:22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.

3:22 Jesus was still in Judea. His visit there began in 2:13 and included His time with Nicodemus, undoubtedly in Jerusalem. In John 4 He will return via Samaria to Galilee, His usual place of ministry.

This verse says Jesus baptized and 4:2 says He did not. This is not a contradiction. In their language they could say a person did something even if he only *caused* it to be done. We too speak this way. We say Hitler invaded Russia, when all we mean is that he made the decision to do so, and others carried out his orders. Jesus baptized only in the sense that He had His disciples do it. (See the notes at 4:1-3.) Jesus spent some time with His

disciples. This is one of many indications that we do not have an exact daily record of Jesus' activities in the Gospels but a few highlights specially chosen (20:30,31).

3:23-24 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison).

3:23,24 John's baptizing work continued for a time after he had announced Jesus as the Messiah in chapter 1. In John 3, people were still listening to him, repenting and being baptized. His ministry probably ended soon after this because the apostle felt he needed to add that he was still not in prison. Probably the first readers of this Gospel were aware of events related to the time of Christ. The imprisonment of John is reported very early in Mark (Mark 1:14). The events in John 1-4 were also early in the span of Christ's public ministry. They happened while John was still active. The overlapping of these ministries was brief.

3:25-26 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness – look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."

3:25,26 There was some debate about the ritual of cleansing. We are not told what the two sides of the dispute were, nor the identity of the Jew mentioned here. John's disciples heard that Jesus was also active in baptizing. Thus John's work was not the only activity of that sort. His disciples sensed that John's ministry was fading and that attention was moving in the direction of Jesus. They were not pleased that all were flocking to Jesus. (This is another of many examples where the Greek word for *all* cannot mean each and every person.) John's disciples remembered his witness to Christ. The purpose of all his work was that Jesus might be made known to Israel (1:31) as the chosen Messiah and Lamb of God. Yet some of his group were disturbed that a ministry John had introduced was gaining a following too. Obviously they did not understand John's role.

3:27-30 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

3:27-30 Maybe John's disciples thought he would not be pleased at what they thought was bad news. But John understood the purpose of God and the wonderful, unique, but limited ministry he had been given. Before telling of his joy at their "sad" news, John affirmed the sovereign right of God to assign a ministry as He pleases. The Lord may limit success, gifts, and publicity, but all legitimate ministries are entirely His gift (Ephesians 4:7). Paul referred to his ministry as a *grace given* to him (1 Corinthians 3:10, Galatians 2:9 & Ephesians 3:7). It is the *only* way anyone can accomplish anything good. Every man ought to have a deep humility about his ministry in light of such truth (1 Corinthians 4:7).

John reminds his followers that he had made clear to them that he was not the Christ. Since he had been sent by God to introduce Christ the Lord, the success of his ministry would be evident in people giving attention to the One introduced. If their interest was fixed on John that would make his ministry a failure.

John's famous analogy was that he was not the groom, so he should not have the bride. For the good friend of the groom to try to take the bride would be a terrible betrayal. The satisfaction of a loyal friend is to see the groom have his wife, and for the bride to be united to her husband. What the disciples reported to John brought him joy. If everyone was going to Jesus (an exaggeration they made) then John knew his work was being fulfilled. His interest in Christ made his joy complete to hear such a report. He was soon to be imprisoned and his public work finished, so his joy was full; his life was near its end. That men were following Christ and not

him was wonderful. John assured them that what his disciples had observed had to continue, and John’s public role had to decline even more. (Here is another use of the Greek word for *must*, as in vv.7 & 14.)

Comments by the Apostle – John 3:31-36

Earlier the Apostle John added to the narrative of Nicodemus a theological and evangelistic explanation in vv.16-21. He does the same here. It is unlikely, that the words of 3:31-36 are from the mouth of John the Baptist. I find it more convincing that this is further theological reflection from the apostle, more insight imparted by the Holy Spirit. John never wavers from his purpose that he writes to persuade readers to believe in Christ. John the Baptist had a mandate from heaven, but he did not come from heaven. So here is a paragraph on the supremacy of Christ, the One who is above all. Like the earlier explanatory note, this thematic parallel contrasts the wonder of Christ with the horror of unbelief. I suspect that except for v.36 this short passage of Scripture has received little attention. It is a valuable addition to what the Bible tells us about Christ. More attention should be given to it. We are not reading this Gospel as we ought if we skip over any of it.

3:31-32 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.

3:31,32 John opened this Gospel with the Word is God. Here he asserts the same truth in different words. Only Jesus is the One from above. He is not merely from there; He is Himself *above all*. He was above all even when He was here below. As the One *above all*, He is Lord. The incarnation of Christ did not diminish His deity! With all others it is different. We belong to the earth. We do not know the mysteries of God, but our Jesus Christ spoke with a different access to truth; His knowledge is firsthand. John could only speak what was given to him from heaven, and that was limited. Jesus came from heaven speaking as One Who had eternally possessed from His Father all the thoughts and plans of God (v.35). The prophet John did not know how to identify the Messiah until given a signal from God (1:33,34). Jesus’ testimony and ministry had no such limitation.

3:32 There is no higher and no more reliable witness of the things of God than Christ, the One from heaven. Surely all mankind would listen to a witness of that caliber and accept what He had to say! But v.32 shows the evil nature of our hearts, because no one accepts the testimony about the Lord given by the Lord from heaven! [See the Appendix: The Cannots and the New Birth below.] Rejection of Christ’s testimony is the *natural* reaction of all mankind. (A computer has a natural or *default* setting. To have a different font on my screen, I must change how it is set; otherwise it will function always and only with the default setting. Likewise, a man will always reject Christ unless God intervenes.)

A Startling Way to Say It: “... *no one accepts his testimony*,” (v.32). It is the standard human response that the world did not recognize Him (1:10). His people did not receive Him (1:11). Men love darkness (3:19). Yet those born of God (1:13) did receive and did accept the testimony of Christ (3:33) and came to the light (3:21). God had overcome the contrary disposition of their hearts. The general truth is that all reject. When anyone believes, it is because of the intervention of God to save through “*rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5). John would have told the truth had he said that some did not receive and some did in chapter 1, or in v.32 that some accepted Jesus’ message, and some did not. The Lord chose instead to highlight our resistance with universal language: *no one accepts!* In this way the Bible states our natural response, so we might see that faith is a response *supernaturally* generated in us. If these texts had stated that some believed and some did not, that would have shown only the history of belief and rejection. The Holy Spirit wanted to show our native resistance, so we would not conclude that faith and unbelief are both natural to us. Only unbelief is.

The Natural Response	The Supernatural Response
Did not receive, 1:11	Yet some did, 1:12,13
Would not come to the Light, 3:19,20	Yet some did, 3:21
Did not accept His testimony, 3:32	Yet some did, 3:33

3:33-35 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

3:33-35 Faith is a testimony on our part that God is true. Our faith never makes God true, but realizes that He is. We can be sure Christ is the truth since He is the One God sent, the One Who speaks what has been given to Him. Unlike all other prophets, Jesus had the Spirit without any limitation (Isaiah 11:1,2). One significant function of the Spirit was to reveal truth (14:17,26). Christ not only has the Spirit but, as One loved by His Father, He has all things, because all has been placed in His hands (see 5:20). This is His inherent right and role as the Son. The Father has promised Him the nations (Psalm 2:8). The keys of death and hell are in His hands (Revelation 1:18). Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, and has made Him known (1:18). The Father could not send a more complete representation of Himself than His Son (Colossians 1:15,16; Hebrews 1:1-3). One cannot exceed the exact likeness of the glory of God, and this is what Christ is.

3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

3:36 Such a revelation and such a Person demands faith. And believing results in eternal life. To reject the Son is a deep affront to God's Majesty as God because Jesus Christ is His Son. *"He who rejects me rejects Him who sent me"* (Luke 10:16). Unbelief is also a rejection of God's supreme kindness as the Sender of the Savior. A refusal to believe is a mindless neglect of our own welfare, since our eternal life depends on accepting God's testimony to us. To reject the Son is to be denied all the benefits of salvation. The rejecter has never seen life and never will. To remain in unbelief is to remain condemned (3:18) and under God's wrath. Later, John gives a longer theological analysis of unbelief, when near the end of Jesus' public ministry he wrote of those who "still would not believe" (12:37-43).

The Wrath of God John 3:36 corrects the false notion that God is without wrath, or that He is only gracious, or that He might save all whether they believe or not. The Apostle John wrote John 3:16 & 36 of the love of God for a wicked world and of the wrath of God upon that same world for rejecting His Son. As rebellious sinners we began under His wrath (Ephesians 2:3). In love, the Father gave Him, and in wrath He rejects all who reject Him. The gospel is not good news for those with a vague belief in God as some undefined "power". Saving faith is always in Christ, the One sent. He is God's great overture of reconciliation, but still no man of his own will accepts His testimony. The wrath of God is well deserved. The Father loves the Son and has given all things to Him; He will never tolerate rejection of Him. Never mistake God's restraint as if rejection of the Son does not matter to the Father. It does and God will show it.

4:1-3 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), 3 he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.

4:1-3 Centuries ago a German monk divided the Bible into chapters and verses. This has helped us to locate words in the Bible, but sometimes the chapter break comes in an awkward place. In my opinion these three verses mentioning baptism fit better at the end of chapter 3.

Since Jesus never baptized at all (see the notes at 3:22) and preached the Word of God often, it shows what a perversion of gospel ministry it is to make water baptism our primary ministry. (See 1 Corinthians 1:13-17 and the notes at 1:32,33.) Our Lord's work was not ritual but reality. He does command and He did ordain a ritual with water, done by the hands of men (Colossians 2:11) as a means to signify the reality of the gospel. Baptism is not optional, but it is never a replacement for the message of faith in Christ – neither a replacement nor an equal. Faith comes from the preaching of the gospel. God has given baptism to strengthen faith, not replace it or supersede it.

There is a clear connection between the Lord learning of the increased attention of the Pharisees and His leaving Judea. Perhaps He left to prevent any notion that His ministry was in competition with the baptism of John. The Lord often avoided confrontations as in 6:15; 7:1; 8:59; 10:40; & 11:54.

Appendix 3A The Cannots and the New Birth

The Lord used strong language to show how helpless sinners are. He said people **cannot see and cannot enter** God's kingdom. Against this impossibility, He gave one hope. If one has a certain kind of birth, then he can see and can enter. (See the notes on v.5 for what kind of birth this is.) The NT uses the Greek word *dunatai* (δύναται) for *can*. In John 3:3 & 5 Jesus used it with a negative to mean *cannot*.

The Meaning & Use of the Word In John 3 the Lord focused on how a man cannot have something unless born from above. A number of other Scriptures do the very same. This word is not always translated the same way in English. Here are examples which show it means being able or not able to do something.

No one by worry *can* add to his life; we are *not able* to do that (Luke 12:25,26). A city on a hill *cannot* be hidden (Matthew 5:14). We are *not able* to serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). A divided house *cannot* stand (the word appears 4 times in Mark 3:24,27). *Can* a blind man lead the blind? (Luke 6:39). *Can* a demon open the eyes of the blind? (10:21) Both times this means: No, he cannot! No one is *able* to snatch the Lord's sheep out of His hand (John 10:29). Since it is God's Word, the Scripture *cannot* be broken (John 10:35).

The Cannots about Those not Born from Above In addition to 3:3,5 the mind of an unconverted person *cannot* submit to God's law and *cannot* please God (Romans 8:6-9). He is *not able* to understand (1 Corinthians 2:14), and *cannot* come unless the Father draws him (6:44,65). Unless born of God men *cannot* hear (8:43), *cannot* believe (12:39), and *cannot* receive the Spirit of truth (14:17). Note that most of these are in the Gospel of John. John wrote to promote faith in Christ, and so, very naturally, he spoke of the spiritual obstacles to it.

The Problem Man is hostile to God (Romans 8:7) and dead in his sins (Colossians 2:13). He loves darkness, avoids the light (3:19-21), cannot come (6:44), and cannot bear good fruit (Matthew 7:18). He is defiled by his own heart (Mark 7:20-23), and captive to the devil (1 John 3:10; 5:19). In this slavery and helplessness, he has no will that is free to escape and no ability even to obey the call of the gospel. The dead cannot help themselves (Ephesians 2:1-3).

The Solution: In man's condition outside of Christ, from the human standpoint, it is impossible to be saved, but nothing is impossible with God. Only He is able to change our condition (Matthew 19:25,26). God can do in a man's heart what the man cannot do. For a man to be saved God must act. It is error to limit what God does; He does not simply provide a salvation for man to take or leave on his own. Because of the hostility of his condition, man is unable to respond to God in allegiance. This inability to believe and accept the gospel means that, if anyone is to be saved, God must bring that sinner to life. This is what He does, according to His will (3:8) as He chooses (5:21). God brings the dead to life (Colossians 2:13). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6), but man in his flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:8). This means he cannot believe on his own even though he must believe to be saved. How can any sinner ever believe? Without the needed birth from above, faith in Christ is impossible. A man dead in sins cannot rouse himself from his deadness. Salvation must begin not just with a message from God to the human heart but with a transformation of the heart. Repentance is beyond man's ability, so God gives repentance unto life (Acts 11:18). Apart from being born of the Spirit, no person would ever bow to confess Jesus as his Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9).

God saves us by the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5). The change is so radical that *“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God”* (1 John 3:9). Here this word is used to show what the *believer* cannot do. Before the new birth, the sinner cannot see; afterward, though he sins, he cannot live in sin as he once did. Being in Christ does not remove our human inability to please God on our own. *“The branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me”* (John 15:4). But being in Christ opens to us a new ability to obey as we abide in Christ.

A well-known book was titled *“How to Be Born Again”*. The title misses the point that the new birth on our side is passive. The life from above is entirely the activity of God in us, not our activity to gain a new condition. *“Through him you believe in God ... and so your faith [is] in God. [Y]ou have been born again ... through the ... word of God”* (1 Peter 1:21-23). *“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures”* (James 1:18). No one would seriously write a book titled *“How to Be Born”* as a guide for someone to follow before he or she is conceived. What is irrational in the natural realm is just as irrational in the spiritual.

The new birth is the turning point in a person's life. Before it, there is in us only deadness to God; afterwards with a new heart we have a God-given motivation to know God. We are not born to this new life by believing (a very common viewpoint); rather, we believe because we have been born of the Spirit. All the decisive resurrecting power remains in God's hands. *“... Because of him you are in Christ Jesus ...”* (1 Corinthians 1:30). He has designed a salvation in which we will be forever indebted to Him. He does not thank us for our believing, as if our faith were the act of a free will unhampered by sin. Instead, we thank Him for the gift of life that brought us to faith in Christ.