



The Gospel of John - Chapter Three

II. John 1:19-12:50 - The Signs of the Messiah (continues)

II.b John 2:13-4:54 - Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, Judæa, Samaria, and to Gentiles (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

Jesus receives a visit from a highly regarded Jewish teacher, who clearly believes that Jesus was sent by God and that he might even be the long awaited Messiah; thus the purpose of the visit was to find out more about him.

Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the need for rebirth in the Spirit, which Nicodemus fails to grasp. Jesus therefore tells him that, unless he can understand what Jesus is speaking of in earthly terms, he will never understand things of heaven and the work of the Spirit. However, God's gift of his Son was intended to bring such understanding. God's purpose is clearly stated: not condemnation but salvation for all who believe in the Son.

Some of John the Baptist's disciples report that Jesus' team are also baptising to which John responds that his own work will now pass away as the bridegroom, Jesus, is the one who will receive the bride. John, as the bridegroom's friend, is filled with joy at the prospect of the coming union.

The apostle John concludes the chapter with conformation that Jesus is the Son sent from heaven by the Father to speak the words of God and that those who accept him already have life eternal.

II.b.ii John 3:1-21 - Nicodemus Visits Jesus

The Pharisee Nicodemus visits Jesus at night, clearly representing others in authority as he uses the first person plural pronoun. However, not all support him, hence the need to come during the hours of darkness.

Jesus teaches Nicodemus some spiritual realities but Nicodemus takes them as literal, physical references and is thus confused. Jesus uses illustrations from the

natural to explain the supernatural, for one can see the effects of the wind but cannot see the wind itself, so it is with the Spirit.

Jesus also alludes to himself as being God's gift to the whole world for salvation that will come to fruition when he is lifted up, an allusion to crucifixion, although Jesus also uses links to OT texts that Nicodemus would be familiar with to help him realise Jesus' Messianic ministry.

The section concludes with a statement that those who come into the light and accept Jesus as the Messiah already have eternal life but those who choose to remain in the darkness of the world will face the wrath of God when judgement comes upon the world.

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

John 3:1

Later in the story Nicodemus defends Jesus among his fellow Pharisees, stating that their law gives Jesus the right to be heard before being condemned (7:50-52). He also assists Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus (19:38-42). Therefore, he will end the story as a disciple but here, at the beginning, he is something less.

A leader of the Jews refers to a member of the Jewish governing body called the Sanhedrin, which comprised of seventy members, mostly Sadducees but with a significant minority of Pharisees.

² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'

John 3:2

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, which usually carries a symbolic overtone of spiritual darkness elsewhere in John, e.g. 9:4, 11:10 and 13:30 but not 21:3.

We know indicates that Nicodemus was representing other Pharisees who had clearly not yet decided whether to accept or reject who Jesus is. Therefore, his assessment of Jesus is not his own private opinion and displays a willingness for some of them to know more at this stage at least.

Coming from the <<*teacher of Israel*>> (v.10), the address Rabbi, which means teacher, denotes respect, especially since it was known that Jesus did not have formal rabbinic training (7:15).

Who has come from God could have meant either the way in which the OT prophets were sent by God or that there were rumours already circulating that Jesus was indeed the long awaited and expected Messiah from God.

These signs presumably include many miracles performed by Jesus in Jerusalem (2:23), which Nicodemus acknowledges could not be achieved apart from the presence of God.

³ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ ⁵ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

John 3:3-6

The Kingdom of God, a major topic in the other Gospels, is mentioned only here in John. However, Jesus does refer to his own Kingdom in a conversation with Pontius Pilate: <<*Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here’*>> (John 18:36). Nicodemus may have believed he was speaking with a fellow Rabbi but he was in fact speaking with the King of Israel (1:49).

How can anyone be born after having grown old? In his response to Nicodemus, Jesus is giving him the opportunity to recognise who it is that stands before him. But Nicodemus gets confused. When Jesus says one must be born from above, Greek *anōthen*, Nicodemus takes it as being ‘born again’, as used in the NIV text. Jesus is speaking of the spiritual realm, but Nicodemus takes it as referring to the physical. Such a mistake need not be an absolute barrier to understanding Jesus. The Samaritan woman will have the same problem, and yet Jesus will use her misunderstandings to reveal himself to her (4:1-26). However, Nicodemus is unable to pick up on the additional clues Jesus gives.

This discussion of the need for spiritual rebirth further develops the earlier reference to the ‘children of God’ who are ‘born of God’ <<*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God*>> (John 1:12-13). Therefore, the phrase born of water and Spirit refers to spiritual birth, which cleanses from sin and brings spiritual transformation and renewal.

Water here does not refer to the water of physical birth, nor is it likely that it refers to symbolic baptism. The background is generally accepted to be Ezekiel 36:25-27, where God promises: <<*I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances*>>, a sentiment that Paul captures so well: <<*But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*>> (Titus 3:4-5).

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. This is a simple statement, yet rich in meaning. Flesh might naturally bring thoughts of the physical body, but in biblical language it refers to the natural mind that is imputed through Adam's disobedience; it is the mind that people are born with. However, once one is born of the Spirit then there is a need for a change of mindset: *<<Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>>* (Romans 12:2), otherwise there will be turmoil in the soul as the human mind tries to do as it pleases rather than be guided by the Spirit.

⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

John 3:7-8

What follows in Ezekiel Chapter 37 is the vision of the valley of dry bones in which the Spirit's restoration of the people is described as bringing the dead to life. What is needed is a new heart and a new life; that is, you must be born from above. Only those alive in the realm of the spirit by the Spirit will be able to recognise and enter that realm.

The change from singular: I said to you to plural: you must be born from above, probably is meant to include Nicodemus and his fellow Sanhedrin members, the ‘we’ in v.2, but the plural also carries broader application to all people: everyone must be born from above, or born again in some translations.

The wind blows where it chooses. The fundamental point is God's initiative in bringing spiritual life, which is reinforced by this illustration from nature. One can see the effects of the presence of the wind, but one cannot see the wind itself nor map out where it comes from or where it goes, at least before modern technology. So also in the spiritual realm people can see the effects, but they cannot map out nor control the activity of the Spirit. It is God alone who initiates and produces this birth from above. Thus, once again John draws his readers back to the theme of God's grace.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Paul provides clear teaching on the difference between those who have the Spirit and those who do not: *<<Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ>>* (1 Corinthians 2:14-16).

Wind and Spirit translate the same Greek and Hebrew words, *pneúma* and *ruach* respectively. Both also mean breath.

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

John 3:9-10

How can these things be? As a prominent teacher, a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus should be able to understand Jesus, since this new life is like the resurrection depicted in Ezekiel Chapter 37, and the new heart in: <<Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live>> (Deuteronomy 30:6), <<But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people>> (Jeremiah 31:33), and: <<A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh>> (Ezekiel 36:26).

Jesus had shown respect for men like Nicodemus from an early age: <<After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions>> (Luke 2:46). However, he clearly wanted them to have more spiritual discernment to guide their teaching rather than relying on the traditions that were handed down to them.

A teacher of Israel should have recognised such a vital theme, especially as it is conveyed so clearly in imagery from Ezekiel. Instead, Nicodemus is left here stammering his question, how? His problem, as Jesus points out, is precisely one of receptivity (v.11). Although it was acceptable for a student to question his rabbi, if Nicodemus really believes that God is with Jesus, then he should receive what Jesus says. But he does not, and thereby his heart is revealed. The signs have shown him that Jesus has come from God, yet he does not receive Jesus’ teaching as teaching that has come from God.

¹¹ ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?’

John 3:11-12

Very truly, I tell you. These words echo what the Johannine Christians say to their Jewish opponents in John’s own day. The striking use of I and we seems to be an example of the voice of the risen Christ speaking as the head of the community of those who have received the Spirit and bear witness. The ‘we know’ of a ruler of the Jews (v.2) is countered by the we know of the Lord of the Christians.

We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen. Jesus came only to pass on what was revealed to him by his Father: <<Then Jesus answered them, ‘My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am

speaking on my own>> (John 7:16-17). He expects that those who are spiritually aware will understand this and receive his teaching.

Earthly things probably refers to Jesus' teaching about the new birth, which takes place in a person's life on earth. It seems strange to call the topic of entrance into the Kingdom of God earthly! But it is earthly in the sense that it refers to the effects of divine activity here on earth. If Nicodemus as a teacher cannot even understand this, then Jesus cannot convey deeper truths to him, i.e. heavenly things. You is plural in the Greek in the second instance in v.11, i.e. you do not receive our testimony, and all four times in v.12.

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

John 3:13

Ascended into heaven probably means 'entered into the counsels of God in heaven and remained there', for two men, Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), are known to have been taken by God while still alive.

Jesus' strong denial that anyone else has ascended into heaven has in mind the claims of the Jewish mystics, in particular the traditions concerning Moses' ascension. Moses did not ascend into heaven; he only lifted up the serpent (v.14), which was a figure of Christ. Moses is indeed a source of revelation, but he is so through his witness to Jesus. Thus, John does not simply reject the claims of the Jewish mystics; he also shows that what they were after is available in Jesus. Among those who pursued heavenly journeys some 'sought to find an answer to the question of what would follow death' and 'others desired the vision of God which could bring with it eternal life'.

When Jesus descended from heaven it does not mean that in his omnipresent, divine personhood he completely left all fellowship with the Father, but rather that the focus of his activity became his earthly life as one who was now both God and man. Agur, prophesying of God and his Son, said: <<*Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is the person's name? And what is the name of the person's child? Surely you know!*>> (Proverbs 30:4).

¹⁴ And just 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.

John 3:14-15

When Jesus says so must the Son of Man be lifted up he means it is God who lifts him up, since must, Greek *dei*, often refers to God's plan, and be lifted, Greek *hypothenai*, is an example of a passive verb used to refer to God's action, a common form of expression in the NT. In this way Moses has a role analogous to that which God plays, but the older revelation is now fulfilled in Jesus.

The serpent in the wilderness was raised up to halt an infestation of poisonous snakes that God had sent as a punishment against the rebellious Israelites as they wandered through the desert after leaving Egyptian slavery: <<*So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live*>> (Numbers 21:9). The prophet foresaw the Messiah as the one who would be lifted up: <<*See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high*>> (Isaiah 52:13).

The reference to the Son of Man being lifted up is the first of three lifted up references in John's Gospel: <<*So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me*>> (John 8:28), <<*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*>> (John 12:32). All three sayings speak of the future 'lifting up' of the Son of Man in a typical Johannine double meaning, so that it refers to both Jesus' death and his resurrection, and exaltation to glory in heaven: <<*Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear*>> (Acts 2:33), and: <<*God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins*>> (Acts 5:31).

Whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Salvation is not for the Jews only, in fact many Jews will not gain life eternal because they have rejected God's solution for reconciliation and atonement.

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:16

Here is the most famous summary of the Gospel in the entire Bible. For connects back to v.15 meaning 'because of this', and explains what happened to make it possible that someone can have eternal life, that is, through believing in Christ.

God so loved the world was an astounding statement in that context because the OT and other Jewish writings had spoken only of God's love for his people Israel. God's love for 'the world' made it possible for 'whoever' (v.15), who believes in Christ, not Jews alone, to have eternal life.

God's love for the world was not mere sentiment but led to a specific action: he gave his only Son, which John elsewhere explains as sending him to earth as a man (v.17) to suffer and die and thereby to bear the penalty for sins: <<*whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed*>> (Romans 3:25).

Only Son. Jesus is the 'Son of God', not in the sense of being created or born, but in the sense of being a Son who is exactly like his Father in all attributes, and in the sense of having a Father-Son relationship with God the Father. The Greek word

underlying only, *monogenēs*, means ‘one of a kind or unique’. He was the child that had been promised: <<*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*>> (Isaiah 9:6).

The purpose of giving his Son was to make God’s great gift of eternal life available to anyone, to everyone who believes in him, that is, whoever personally trusts in him, which is expanded upon in the comments made on 11:25.

Not perish means not perish in eternal judgment, in contrast to having eternal life, the life of abundant joy and immeasurable blessing in the presence of God forever. Those who believe in Christ have that eternal life and already experience its blessings in this present time, not yet fully, but in some significant measure.

¹⁷ ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:17

Send the Son. John’s favourite designation of Jesus is that of the Son sent by the Father, which occurs a further six times. There was a familiar concept in Jewish life that the messenger is like the sender himself: <<*Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me*>> (John 13:20), as confirmed in Mishnah, Berakoth 5.5. Jesus is that Sent One par excellence (9:7), and in 20:21-22 he in turn sends his disciples. Being sent, in the case of both Jesus and his followers, implies that the commission, charge, and message are issued by the sender rather than originating with the one who is sent.

In order that the world might be saved through him. This verse refers to Christ’s First Coming. He will return to judge and condemn the world at his Second Coming: <<*For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation*>> (John 5:26-29).

¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

John 3:18

Those who believe in him are not condemned. Those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour have already passed through judgement into life, whatever they may have done in life, as Paul confirms: <<*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*>> (Romans 8:1).

Those who do not believe and trust in Christ have neither a positive nor a neutral standing before God. They stand condemned already before God for their sins because they have not trusted God’s solution for guilt, the only Son of God. This

verse also refutes the assertion that a sincere person following any religion can have eternal life with God: <<Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'>> (John 14:6), <<There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved>> (Acts 4:12), <<For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ>> (Romans 10:13-17), and: <<For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all – this was attested at the right time>> (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Regarding OT believers who looked forward to Christ, refer to John 8:56, Romans 4:1-24, Hebrews 11:13 and 11:26.

¹⁹ And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

John 3:19-21

This elaborates on the prologue's reference to the world's darkness and unbelief. Jesus, as the <<**light of the world**>> (John 8:12b) fulfils OT promises of the coming of the light of salvation and the light of God.

The evil of human beings is reflected in their fleeing from the light; at the same time, anything good and true is the product of God's work, i.e. done in God.

Why is it that some come to the light and some do not? John does not unravel this mystery entirely, but these verses shed some light. At first glance this passage seems to say that one's response to the light is determined by one's moral behaviour prior to encountering the light. This cannot be correct, however, since John describes people living immoral lifestyles, such as the Samaritan woman, who come to the light. The key is in the terms be exposed, Greek *elencho*, and be clearly seen, Greek *phaneroo*. It is sometimes assumed that the image in v.20 is of someone working under cover of darkness so no one will know what is taking place. That person does not come to the light lest his or her activity, which is obviously wrong, be seen. But a preferable image is of a person involved in some activity that is morally neutral or even virtuous. This person does not come to the light because it would expose that what was considered virtuous is actually evil.

But those who do what is true, literally, 'but whoever does the truth' seems to refer to specific deeds, thus suggesting moral activity and raising again the interpretation ruled out by the context. The only other use of this phrase: <<**If we**

say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true>> (1 John 1:6) is instructive. The letter is speaking of Christians, so the Gospel's concern with coming to the light is here changed to walking in the light. But the basic meaning of the phrase is the same. In the letter, not to do what is true is equivalent to lying, in particular, to saying one has fellowship with God and yet walking in darkness. The psalmist held a similar view: <<*You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth*>> (Psalm 52:3).

This is exactly the problem of the Jewish opponents in the Gospel. They claim to be children of God, yet they reject the Son of God; they are self-deceived and, according to Jesus in John 8:42-47 are liars. Thus to do what is true is not just a matter of morality, it involves not being deceived, having a right evaluation of oneself in relation to God. Truth, for John, has to do with reality, and here the issue is the reality of one's claim to have fellowship with God.

II.b.iii John 3:22-30 - Jesus and John the Baptist

Jesus' ministry was launched from the ministry of John the Baptist (1:19-37). Now that Jesus has begun his ministry the Baptist returns to the stage to bear witness, setting his seal to what has been revealed. However, he does so after it is made clear that there are in fact differences between the Baptist and Jesus himself. That which is new in Jesus, going beyond the Baptist's own message, is accepted and affirmed by John the Baptist on the basis of his recognition of who Jesus is.

²² After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judæan countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptised.

John 3:22

Jesus was baptising, or at least he was overseeing his disciples as they continued administering the baptism of John, which was based on repentance and which symbolised purification from sin, as commented on in 1:28. John 4:2 will show that Jesus himself did not actually perform any water baptisms.

He spent some time there with his disciples. There are several occasions recorded in the Gospels, and probably many more that are not, when Jesus sought to be alone with his inner core of disciples. This would allow him time to teach them about the Kingdom and the Gospel message that they were to take to the world in order to build the church. Examples are: <<*Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities*>> (Matthew 11:1), <<*And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city*>> (Mark 11:19), and: <<*Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!'*>> (Luke 10:23).

²³ John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised —

²⁴ John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

John 3:23-24

John the Baptist had not yet been thrown into prison alerts readers to the fact that everything that has happened up to this point in John's Gospel takes place prior to: <<***Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God***>> (Mark 1:14), which indicates the start of his earthly ministry in its fullest sense. John's imprisonment would lead to him being beheaded by Herod Antipas to please his wife Herodias, the account of which is told in Matthew 14:1-12.

²⁵ Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptising, and all are going to him.' ²⁷ John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven.'

John 3:25-27

Just as Jesus' first disciples came from among the ranks of John's disciples, so the first real offense taken with Jesus is on the part of the Baptist's own disciples.

The one who was with you across the Jordan refers to Jesus, probably at the time of his baptism, although it could have been the time when he was simply walking by for John to point him out to Andrew and John. The location of this meeting was once again east of the River.

They argue with a Jew over ceremonial washing, i.e. purification, Greek *katharismos*. This certain Jew seems to be simply a figure representing those who came out to the wilderness seeking purification in baptism. Since this discussion causes them to go to John and complain about Jesus, it is evident that these disciples perceive differences between their master and Jesus. They are also upset because Jesus is becoming more popular than the Baptist. This certain Jew would be one of those more attracted to Jesus, and the differences between Jesus and the Baptist must have to do with purification. One of the most obvious things about Jesus that a Jew would notice is his rejection of the various purificatory practices of the Pharisees and his non-ascetical ways compared with those of John the Baptist.

All are going to him. Although John will go on to explain that it is right for the people to turn to Jesus and away from himself, it seems that there was some jealous rivalry stemming from his disciples. They had clearly misunderstood what John had told them about Jesus, something that millions of other people have done ever since!

No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. The earlier testimony (1:32-34) expressed clearly the sovereign initiative. Now the Baptist's statement about the gift from heaven is also a powerful expression of divine sovereignty, a theme of great importance in this Gospel and in this chapter in particular. All of life is gift, all is of grace. This key Johannine theme is here echoed by the Baptist as he testifies to Jesus once again, now in the light of Jesus' own ministry.

²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.”

John 3:28

You yourselves are my witnesses. John’s disciples had heard him teach them about Jesus and yet they failed to understand that Jesus is the greater one and that they should not complain that more people are now going to him rather than coming to their master.

The Baptist’s assertion that he has been sent ahead of the Messiah alludes to Malachi 3:1 <<*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts*>>, which is directly applied to the Baptist in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27.

²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.

John 3:29

The Baptist’s reference to Jesus as the bridegroom, which Jesus also applies to himself: <<*And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast’*>> (Matthew 9:15), identifies Jesus as Israel’s long-awaited King and Messiah.

Christ as the bridegroom is implied by Paul: <<*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish*>> (Ephesians 5:25-27), and more explicitly by John: <<*Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure’*>> (Revelation 19:7-8).

In the OT, Israel is frequently depicted as God’s bride, for example: <<*You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you*>> (Isaiah 62:4-5), <<*Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown*>> (Jeremiah 2:2), and: <<*On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband’, and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant*

on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord>> (Hosea 2:16-20).

The Baptist's role is that of the friend of the bridegroom, his best man, who selflessly rejoices with the groom.

³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.'

John 3:30

He must increase, but I must decrease shows that, at this point in salvation history, now that the light has come (1:6-9), the lamp has done its work (5:35).

II.b.iv John 3:31-36 - The One Who Comes from Heaven

This subsection summarises the whole of Chapter 3 by weaving together many of its major themes. In particular, the failure of the people to receive Jesus' testimony (vv.32-33) is again noted, confirming v.11. One who receives Jesus' testimony is described as having certified that God is true, a thought that may recall v.21. The next two verses (vv.34-35) are particularly rich in allusions to previous themes: for the one whom God has sent (v.2 and vv.16-17) speaks the words of God (vv.11-12), for God gives the Spirit without limit (vv.5-8). The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands (v.27). The final verse summarises the theme of judgment (vv.16-21). Indeed, this last verse combines the central motifs of the two meditational passages (vv.16-21 and vv.31-35).

In vv.16-21 the issue is faith in Jesus himself, which is represented in verse 36a: <<*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life*>>. In vv.31-35 the issue is receiving Jesus' testimony (vv.11-12), and this is reflected in the notion of obedience in v.36. Thus, the reader is told who Jesus is and what it means to accept or reject him.

³¹ The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

John 3:31

John's contrast between the one who comes from above and the one who is of the earth in context refers to Jesus and John the Baptist. Something Jesus confirms in principle: <<*He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world'*>> (John 8:23). But by putting the contrast in these terms the reader is brought back to the story of Nicodemus. That is, this passage begins at the same point v.13 does, but now Jesus' identity as the one who comes from heaven is contrasted with the Baptist, who is of the earth. John bears witness to the things of God that have been revealed to him, but they are the things God is doing on earth. In contrast, Jesus

speaks of heavenly things, that is, of the God of heaven who is behind this activity on earth.

³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony.

John 3:32

What he has seen and heard refers to Jesus' eternal existence in heaven and his infinite knowledge of God's nature and counsels. Jesus continues to reiterate that he passes on what his Father has told him to: <<*I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him*>> (John 8:26), and: <<*I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father*>> (John 15:15).

No one accepts his testimony most likely means that very few people, at least up to that point in time, had received it but some had. John also wrote: <<*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him*>> (John 1:10-11), which is a similar generalisation of the situation.

³³ Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true.

John 3:33

Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this. This type of certification uses the same language as is also used for a personal seal. A seal made of wax, clay, or various kinds of soft metal would signify either ownership or authentication of an item or a document; the second sense is probably in view here, as is the case in 6:27.

³⁴ He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

John 3:34

He whom God has sent. In this context about the Father sending the Son, John is saying that the Father gives to Jesus the Spirit without measure. Others had been and will be empowered by the Spirit to some extent, but Jesus has a measureless anointing from the Spirit: <<*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations*>> (Isaiah 42:1), <<*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free*>> (Luke 4:18), and: <<*That message spread throughout Judæa, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went*

about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him>> (Acts 10:37-38).

Jesus speaks the words of God for he was sent by the Father and has his authority to do so. Thus he fulfils the role of an agent. But Jesus is not just an envoy; he is the Son, and as such he is able to do more than simply proclaim a message from a distant God. As Son he receives not just a message but God's Spirit, and from v.35, his Father's love.

³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.

John 3:35

The Father has placed all things in his hands indicates supreme authority for God the Father in the counsels of the Trinity, and a delegated authority over the whole created universe for the Son, as is indicated also in many other NT passages, such as: <<*The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son*>> (John 5:22), <<*Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear*>> (Acts 2:33), <<*Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us*>> (Romans 8:34), <<*When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all*>> (1 Corinthians 15:28), <<*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will*>> (Ephesians 1:3-5), <<*but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds*>> (Hebrews 1:2), <<*And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him*>> (1 Peter 3:21-22). Yet at the same time, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully God in the unity of a single divine being.

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

John 3:36

Has eternal life indicates that eternal life is not merely a future expectation but already a present experience. This is sometimes called John's 'realised eschatology', where eschatology means the events of the end times and the life of the age to come. In John, this kind of life is partially realised or partially made the believer's possession even now in this present age.

Must endure God's wrath makes clear that unless a person believes in Jesus as the Christ of God, he or she remains under God's judgment, as Paul explains: <<**For**

the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen>> (Romans 1:18-25).