

Lesson Three

(John 2:13-2:36)

This section begins as Jesus leaves Peter's house in Capernaum and briefly returns to Jerusalem. He is deeply disturbed by what he finds taking place there.

Jesus Goes to the Temple

(John 2:13-25)

¹³It was almost time for the Passover Festival, so Jesus went to Jerusalem. ¹⁴There in the Temple he found men selling cattle, sheep, and pigeons, and also the moneychangers sitting at their tables. ¹⁵So he made a whip from cords and drove all the animals out of the Temple, both the sheep and the cattle; he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and scattered their coins; ¹⁶and he ordered the men who sold the pigeons, "Take them out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that the scripture says, "My devotion to your house, O God, burns in me like a fire."

¹⁸The Jewish authorities came back at him with a question, "What miracle can you perform to show us that you have the right to do this?"

¹⁹Jesus answered, "Tear down this Temple, and in three days I will build it again."

²⁰"Are you going to build it again in three days?" they asked him. "It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple!"

²¹But the temple Jesus was speaking about was his body. ²²So when he was raised from death, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and what Jesus had said.

²³While Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, many believed in him as they saw the miracles he performed. ²⁴But Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew them all.

²⁵There was no need for anyone to tell him about them, because he himself knew what was in their hearts.

The Passover Feast was the most important of the three great feasts which every able-bodied male Jew who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem was expected to attend. Held in our month of April, its purpose was to remind the Israelites of how God spared their first-born sons in Egypt and freed them from slavery (Exodus 12 and 13).

The Law of Moses required animal sacrifices during each of the seven days of the Feast (Numbers 28:16-25). Rather than bringing animals long distances, visitors to Jerusalem usually bought animals from the local dealers who had set up shop in the large Court of the Gentiles just inside the Temple grounds. This degenerated into a racket, however, as dishonest priests refused to approve any animal which had not been bought from these dealers at highly inflated prices.

In addition, the moneychangers charged the visitors extremely high "service charges" for converting their foreign money into the Jewish money which each male worshiper had to have in order to pay his annual Temple tax (Exodus 30:11-16; Matt. 17:24-27).

Here, then, were merchants and priests working together in order to rob people who came to worship God. The stench and noise of the animals, along with the shouting of the merchants, filled the only area in which a devout Gentile could draw near to God!

So Jesus reacted to this sad scene by an outburst of righteous anger. He was deeply upset by their irreverence toward the Temple and their calloused mistreatment of those who really

wanted to worship. He uses a whip to scatter the animals, then he overturns the tables stacked high with coins. But there is no evidence that he uses the whip on people, for he was not an advocate of physical aggression (John 18:36; Matt. 26:51-56). The merchants could easily round up their animals (he does not free the doves, as they would have escaped) and the money changers could retrieve their coins from the dust. Jesus makes his point without injuring a single person and without destroying any personal property.

In 2:18 the Jews do not actually question the correctness of what Jesus did. What they want to know is upon whose authority he is acting, so they demand a miracle from him. Jesus later performs several miracles which caused many people, including Nicodemus, to believe in him (2:23). But for now he answers them by saying that if they destroy the temple of his body he will rise from the dead in three days (2:19).

Neither the Jewish authorities nor even his own disciples understood at this time exactly what Jesus meant. The Jews make reference to the fact that Herod the Great began reconstructing the Temple complex in about 20 B.C. and that the job was still continuing at this time. Little do they know that by rejecting the promised Messiah they will seal the doom of the Temple (Matt. 27:25,51). The Romans demolished the Temple in 70 A.D., just six years after the final phase of reconstruction was completed.

This episode stands as a vivid warning to those today who are so willing to use church buildings for their money-making gimmicks, including bingo games and lotteries. And let those congregations who think they must raise money by sponsoring teas and chicken dinners wake up to the fact that they are as weak as the tea and as dead as the chicken! We must be careful not to build any barriers between the Lord and his people.

Jesus and Nicodemus

(John 3:1-21)

¹There was a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. ²One night he went to Jesus and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him."

³Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴"How can a grown man be born again?" Nicodemus asked.

"He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!"

⁵"I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus, "that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶A person is born physically of human parents, but he is born spiritually of the Spirit. ⁷Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again. ⁸The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹"How can this be?" asked Nicodemus.

¹⁰Jesus answered, "You are a great teacher in Israel, and you don't know this? ¹¹I am telling you the truth: we speak of what we know and report what we have seen, yet none of you is willing to accept our message. ¹²You do not believe me when I tell you about the things of this world; how will you ever believe me when I tell you about the things of heaven? ¹³And no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven."

¹⁴As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.

¹⁸Whoever believes in the Son is not judged; but whoever does not believe has already been judged, because he has not believed in God's only Son. ¹⁹This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. ²⁰Anyone who does evil things hates the light and will not come to the light, because he does not want his evil deeds to be shown up. ²¹But whoever does what is true comes to the light in order that the light may show that what he did was in obedience to God.

Because the Greek text does not use quotation marks, translators have had trouble deciding where the words of Jesus end and those of the apostle John begin in this section. The TEV ends Jesus' words at verse 13, the RSV at 15, and the NASB at 21.

Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish sect which believed in angels and in the resurrection from the dead. He was also a member of the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin, where he later urges fairness in dealing with Jesus (7:50). And still later we see him help remove Jesus' body from the cross (19:39). He appears, therefore, to have been an honest person searching for greater

spiritual insight. And the miracles he saw caused him to believe that Jesus is "a teacher sent from God" (3:2).

Nicodemus probably expected Jesus to expound upon the Law of Moses or to emphasize the Jewish traditions as ways of achieving salvation. Instead, Jesus lays down the principle that "no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (3:5). The birth of which Jesus speaks is not a physical one, nor is it one that man can accomplish by himself — not even by the power of positive thinking! It must come from God.

What is "the Kingdom of God"? In *The Gospel of John* (I, 101), Paul Butler quotes the following words of Seth Wilson:

It is not easy to give a definite and brief answer which would be satisfactory to all students or true to all the Scriptural uses of the phrase. *Its essential idea is the reign or government of God over the lives of men.* Sometimes it comprehends the characteristics and advantages of the complete submission of an individual life to the rule of God. Sometimes it refers to the whole community of men who obey God on earth. Sometimes it has reference to heaven itself as a place where God reigns in perfect peace, wisdom, and glory. But regardless of all other circumstances, it is essentially the rule of God in the hearts of men.

What does being "born of water" mean? It has only been since the beginning of the Reformation period that men have tried to rewrite baptism out of what Jesus says here. Men like John Calvin over-reacted to the distortion of baptism by the Roman Catholics. Neither Jesus nor anyone else in the New Testament ever taught the concept of baptismal regeneration, i.e., that the physical act itself saves people.

That being "born of water" means being immersed in water is clear by three things. First, there is the example of Jesus himself as he was immersed and received the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:13-17). Second, there is Jesus' command to immerse those who believe in him (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16). And, third, there is the example of the apostles who told believers to repent and be immersed "in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

What "mode" of baptism is the proper one? There would be no confusion on this matter if the translators would be daring enough to list "immerse" as the literal translation of the Greek

word *baptizo*. But to avoid controversy with established church traditions, most merely transliterate *baptizo* into the English as "baptize". The Greeks had a word for "sprinkle" (*rhantizo*) and a word for "pour" (*ballo*), but in all the scriptures given above (and in all the cases of conversion in Acts) the word used is *baptizo*. That evidence should haunt anyone who has not been immersed into Jesus. To any of our readers who have not done so, we repeat the words which Ananias spoke to Paul: "And now, why wait any longer? Get up and be baptized and have your sins washed away by praying to him" (Acts 22:16).

What does being born "of the Spirit" mean? Jesus tries to further clarify his principle by saying, "The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (3:8).

The Greek word *pneuma* (here translated as "wind") is actually translated as "spirit" in 384 out of 386 times that it is found in the New Testament. That may also be a better translation here. But in any case, the point Jesus is making is that the Holy Spirit gives spiritual life. The Holy Spirit was the one who guided the apostles as they preached on the Day of Pentecost in 30 A.D. (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit helped them to write the New Testament, just as he once inspired godly men to write the Old Testament.

Since we know that saving "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through preaching Christ" (Romans 10:17), we can see that the Holy Spirit is the one who leads us to God through the message which the scriptures give to us about Jesus. Thus, the apostle Peter tells the Christians of his day: "Now by your obedience to the truth you have purified yourselves and have come to have a sincere love for your fellow believers, love one another earnestly with all your heart. For through the living and eternal word of God you have been born again as the children of a parent who is immortal, not mortal" (1 Peter 1:22-23).

Who has been "born again"? The New Testament teaches that a person is not a Christian until he has (1) believed what the scriptures say about Jesus, (2) repented of his own sins, and (3) has been immersed into Jesus. Only then may we lay hold of the twin promises of forgiveness of sins and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

In 3:14 reference is made to Numbers 21:4-9, where the

Israelites were punished for their endless complaining against God's provisions for them in the wilderness. So God sent poisonous snakes among them and many died. Under God's directions, "Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten would look at the bronze snake and be healed" (Numbers 21:9). The point here is that Jesus is now man's only hope of salvation and that God, once again, has provided the way of salvation because he loves us (3:16-17).

In 3:16 the Greek phrase *monogenes huios* is properly translated as "only Son" in the TEV. *Monogenes* appears nine times in the New Testament and means "the only one of its kind, unique." So the emphasis here is upon the fact that there never was before and never will be again anyone like Jesus Christ. We are made sons of God by adoption; Jesus was the Son by nature. We become sons by being born into God's spiritual family; but Jesus has always been with God and is, in fact, God (John 1:1).

3:17 tells us that the primary purpose for Christ living upon the earth was to save people, not to condemn them. But each of us brings judgment upon himself when we reject Jesus as our Lord. When Jesus returns a second time, it will be for two purposes: to gather the saved; and to punish the lost, who will be punished forever (Matt. 25:41; 2 Thess. 1:7-9).

Concerning 3:18, Frank Pack says, "A sharp distinction is drawn here between those who truly believe and those who do not believe, those who have passed out of condemnation. Eternal life is now as well as future; judgment is now as well as future" (*The Gospel According to John*, I, 64). Those who reject Jesus deliberately and intentionally choose to do evil rather than good (3:19-20), so "they will perish because they did not welcome and love the truth so as to be saved" (2 Thess. 2:20).

A dishonest man must live in fear of having his real self revealed, perhaps by an income tax audit or a traced fingerprint, not to mention the judgment of God. But the servant of Jesus is happy and fearless (3:20).

Jesus and John the Baptist

(John 3:22-36)

"Actually, Jesus himself did not baptize anyone, only his disciples did" (4:2). These baptisms apparently were done for the same reasons as those performed by John the Baptist, namely to get people to repent of their sins in preparation for the coming of the kingdom. John's baptism was only for the Jews and there was

no bestowal of the Holy Spirit. (That is why it was not valid after Pentecost in 30 A.D. See Acts 18:24-26; 19:1-7.) The promise of remission of sins was in anticipation of Christ's death, while Christian baptism involves remission of sins because of Christ's death hundreds of years ago. Christian baptism also involves immediate forgiveness of sins and receipt of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

3:23 is another of the many scriptures which indicate that baptism in New Testament days was only by immersion. Not much water is needed for sprinkling or pouring, but the Baptist went to Aenon "because there was plenty of water in that place." Even the founder of the Presbyterian Church, John Calvin, admitted: "From these words, we may infer that John and Christ administered baptism by plunging the whole body beneath the water." We cannot go wrong by doing exactly what Jesus did!

In 3:25-26 some of John the Baptist's overly zealous disciples become defensive and bitterly sectarian when they encounter a Jew who had been immersed by the followers of Jesus. In their unbridled loyalty to the Baptist, they could not understand how those other fellows could cut in on John's territory. So they ask him to set the record straight.

And he does (3:27-30). The Baptist compares his work to that of a best man in a wedding ceremony. The best man is to make sure that everything is ready for the bridegroom. And when the wedding ceremony has been successfully completed, the best man may rejoice in a job well done. The Baptist's ministry was destined to be eclipsed by the marvelous ministry of the Son of God, just as the brightest star fades when dawn brings the morning sun.

Back when Henry Ward Beecher was the world-famous minister at Plymouth Church, he had to be out of town one Sunday. So his own brother agreed to preach in his absence. The sanctuary was packed with people that Sunday. But when it became obvious that Henry Ward Beecher would not preach, many in the audience got up and headed for the door. Suddenly the guest speaker arose and said, "All who came to worship Henry Ward Beecher this morning may leave at this time. The rest will stay to worship God." Praise the Lord that there are people who, like John the Baptist, point our attention in the right way!

It is toward Jesus, who is "greater than all," that our words and actions should point. Not everyone will accept him as their Savior

(3:32), but to those who do Jesus has the power to grant them eternal life (3:35-36). Those who are not born again are still dead in their sins, destined for hell (3:36).

Thought Stimulators on John 2:13-3:36

1. Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem at this time?
2. What happens to the image of Jesus being "meek and mild" in the light of his cleansing the Temple?
3. Why was Jesus upset with the animal sellers and moneychangers?
4. Is "righteous anger" ever an appropriate response for Christians today? Why?
5. In what ways might our own actions keep people from God just as much as did the actions of the merchants and moneychangers?
6. Who was Nicodemus?
7. What is "the Kingdom of God"?
8. What does being "born of water" mean?
9. What "mode" of baptism does the New Testament teach?
10. What does being "born of the Spirit" mean?
11. Have you been "born again," as the scriptures teach?
12. Share with the class how you felt just before and just after you were immersed.
13. Memorize John 3:16, using the TEV text.
14. How many people did Jesus personally immerse?
15. Why did John the Baptist go to Aenon?
16. Put yourself in the shoes (or sandals!) of John the Baptist for a minute. As the most popular preacher in town, how would *you* have reacted to the news of Jesus' success? (circle one)
(A) Resentment (C) Confusion
(B) Amazement (D) Happiness