

The Gospel of John

Session 2

John 2:13—3:36

I. John 2:13-22

1. There is an account of this event in all four Gospels. One of the things which sets John's account apart from the other three is that he places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than at the end. John also uniquely draws a connection between
2. Jesus now departs from Galilee (from Capernaum) and goes "up to Jerusalem" (2:13). The reason for his journey is significant: Passover. Passover not only celebrated Israel's deliverance from Egypt but it also anticipated Israel's final deliverance. Passover add another symbolic layer to the rich symbolism of the wedding feast.
3. In the temple, Jesus finds vendors selling animals for sacrifice (oxen, sheep and pigeons) and money changers who exchange Roman coins (with the idolatrous image of the emperor) for Tyrian coins to enable Jewish men to pay the required Temple tax. While not particularly edifying, there was nothing immoral about either of these things. Jesus engages in three abrupt actions which express his opposition to these activities. Note the verbs in 2:15. Jesus "drove them all out...he poured out the coins of the money-changers...overturned their tables". One clue to the significance of Jesus' actions can be found in the contrast between "the temple" (2:14) and "my Father's house" (2:16). This suggests that we have two rival views of the meaning of the Temple here. On one hand, there is that of "the Jews" (2:13), the view of official Judaism, and, on the other hand, there is Jesus'. For "the Jews," the Temple is a place of worship, a place which they control, and so the selling of animals and the changing of money can be thought of as necessary. For Jesus, the Temple is his Father's "house" and not a "house of trade" (2:16).
4. Jesus' disciples accept this and connect what Jesus says to Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17). In doing this, they identify Jesus as a person whose zeal for God and his house puts his life at risk. We are already being given hints about Jesus' death.
5. "The Jews" demand a miraculous sign from Jesus as proof of his authorization for doing "these things". The sign Jesus offers is that "this temple" will be destroyed and then he will raise it up in three days. Significantly, the word Jesus uses for "temple" in 2:19 is not the word used in 2:14. He is speaking of another "temple". "The Jews" understand Jesus to be speaking of another "temple" and so misunderstand him. Misunderstanding Jesus, they reject his proposed sign.
6. In 2:21-22 the narrator inserts what might be thought of as a parenthetical remark. The "temple" of which Jesus speaks is not the temple in Jerusalem but the "temple of his body" (2:21). The Presence of God which was to be found in the Father's house has been perfected by the Presence of God in Jesus who is himself the true Temple. This will not be known until Jesus' resurrection (2:22). By the time that we get to Joh's account of Jesus' death, we will learn that his death and resurrection brings the Passover to its fulfillment. The disciples will come to believe the word Jesus has spoken (2:22) and in doing this they will follow Mary (2:5).
7. **For Reflection: John 2:19, 21:** Origen of Alexandria notes the connection which John makes between temple and Christ's body such that Christ's body is the New Temple. He makes a further connection, noting that 1 Peter 2:5 describes the Church as being built of "living stones" into a "spiritual house" (of God) and that Ephesians 2:20 refers to the Church as being built on "the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone," Origen concludes that the "resurrected temple"

refers simultaneously to Christ himself and to his body, the Church. He concludes that “the resurrection of Christ from the passion of the cross contains the mystery of the resurrection of whole body of Christ”. Christ’s “body” and “temple” have multiple meanings and can refer to Christ (resurrected body) and the Church (ecclesiastical body). (*Commentary on John*)

II. John 2:23-25

1. 2:23 takes us back to 2:13 and brings 2:12-22 to a conclusion. Although English translations do not reflect it, the same Greek verb is used in 1:23 and 2:24. In 2:23 this verb designates the faulty belief in Jesus based upon signs. In 2:24 we are told that Jesus did not place his faith in such people.
2. Those who require signs in order to believe (and especially those who demand them) do not enter into a relationship of trust with Jesus. In the words of 1:12-13, they do not really receive Jesus (like Mary has done).
3. 2:25 makes it clear that “sign faith” is inadequate and that Jesus regards it as such. Sign faith is an insufficient response to God’s Presence in Jesus. Jesus does not need to be told about the obstacles to belief for he knows humankind (because it was created through him). Signs, when not demanded, can evoke faith when they serve to direct our attention to the person of Jesus. When demanded and when held to be the basis for faith, they actually prevent it.

III. John 3:1-21

1. 3:1-15 is a dialogue with Nicodemus while 3:16-21 is a discourse. The setting of the dialogue seems to be Jerusalem around the time of Passover. For John, Jesus’ death and resurrection are the true Passover. For Jews, such as Nicodemus, coming to faith will involve this realization.
2. Nicodemus is a Pharisee who steps out of the darkness of the night to meet Jesus the “true light” (1:9). He represents those who have come to a “sign faith” (3:2) and reflects its inadequacies. John considers everything Nicodemus says to be inadequate. Jesus is not a “teacher sent from God” and genuine faith is not something one arrives at on one’s own as a kind of conclusion. Nicodemus has begun a pilgrimage to faith, but he has not arrived at the destination. He wants Jesus to confirm what he has concluded.
3. Instead of confirming Nicodemus’ conclusion, Jesus challenges him to go further. Faith means moving beyond the boundaries of what Nicodemus now conceives. 3:3 is both a challenge and an invitation: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [*anōthen*] he cannot see the kingdom of God”. Jesus deliberately plays on the double meaning of *anōthen* as “from above” or “again”. One cannot see God’s kingdom apart from being born again/from above.
4. Nicodemus does not comprehend either of these meanings. One does not see God’s kingdom by drawing one’s own conclusions from signs and then arriving at a religious hypothesis that one finds fitting. Something more radical is required. Jesus then expands on what he has said in 3:5. Seeing the kingdom of God requires the human experience of water and the divine gift of the Spirit. In other words, being born again/from above involves both a horizontal and a vertical experience. There are good reasons for thinking that baptism is in view here. We have already been told that John baptizes “with water” (1:33) and that the One to come will baptize “with the Holy Spirit” (1:33). Birth again/from above involves John’s baptism by water perfected by the gift of the Holy Spirit. While John does not use the word, baptism is a sacrament in that it involves both a physical sign and the work of the Holy Spirit. “Seeing” the kingdom of God involves living into it as a new order of life and this cannot be the result of a human decision (cf. 1:12-13).
5. To be born of the flesh (3:6) is to be content with what one can see and control just as living “in the flesh” involves making judgments only on the basis of the senses (cf. 7:24). In 3:8 Jesus offers the wind

as a metaphor for the Spirit: Just as one cannot control the wind, one cannot control the Spirit. Being born again/from above places one in the realm of God where human calculations and explanations falter.

6. Nicodemus' response to this in 3:9 is not to reject what Jesus has said but to express complete befuddlement. What Jesus has said is far beyond his categories and he does not know what to make of it. Jesus chides Nicodemus, reminding him that he is a "teacher of Israel" (3:10) and as such he should surely know about the promise that God's Spirit would be poured out on his people (cf. Joel 2:28-32).
7. 3:11-14 is addressed to Nicodemus, but it applies to all those who are in his position (those who merely have a "sign faith"). Jesus has spoken of what he knows (3:11) and what he knows comes from his communion with the Father (1:14, 18) but Nicodemus has not received it. Genuine faith is faith in the word of Jesus. Nicodemus must move from "earthly things" (Israel's traditions) to "heavenly things" (the revelation in Christ) and such a move is not something that one "figures out". No Old Testament figure, Jesus says, ever ascended into heaven such that the full reality of God was made known to him. Instead of being even a person who ascended into heaven and beheld God, *Jesus came from God in order to reveal him on earth* (3:13). Remember 1:18!
8. But how does this revelation take place? Referring to Numbers 21:8-9, Jesus says that the revelation of God will take place through his being "lifted up" (1:14). Just as the people of Israel were healed by looking at the serpent which Moses "lifted up" in the wilderness, humankind will be healed by Jesus as he is "lifted up" on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross will be an exaltation. Thus, the episode in Numbers 21 is a type of Jesus' death on the cross. Just as the lifting up of the bronze serpent brought healing to sinful Israel, so Jesus' crucifixion will both reveal God and give "eternal life" (3:15).
9. 3:16-21 is best thought of as a discourse. It is as if Nicodemus has completely faded from view and Jesus addresses not him but the reader. We move from the befuddlement of a Jew well-disposed to Jesus to addressing God's intentions for "the world" (1:16). What is behind the "lifting up of the Son"? Quite simply it is the love of God. God's gift of the Son is for salvation but, of course, this raises the issue of judgment. The primary work of the Son is salvation and not condemnation (3:17). We should not think of salvation and condemnation as being opposite equals. The work of the Son is salvation; condemnation is for those who refuse to accept this work.
10. Condemnation follows upon the refusal to accept God's revelation in Jesus Christ (3:18). Condemnation follows this refusal because such a refusal is predicated on a choice in favor of darkness and the life which takes place in darkness. The revelation of God is resisted precisely because it is Light, it exposes evil. Accepting God's revelation in Jesus Christ is not a one-time affair for to accept this revelation is to live more and more into the Light. Genuine faith bears fruit. Faith involves living in the light and it becomes clear that the actions of believers "have been carried out in God" (3:21).
11. **Reflection on John 3:5 and 3:14-16:** Reflecting on this text, St. Augustine draws upon an analogy. Just as we are born from a human father and through a human mother and receive a temporal inheritance from them, we are reborn from God through the Church to an eternal inheritance. This new birth takes place, St. Augustine says, through word and sacrament in the Spirit. (*Tractates on John*). Reflecting on John 3:14-16 in light of Numbers 21, St. Augustine says "What are the biting serpents? The sins of the mortality of the flesh. Who is the uplifted serpent? The death of the Lord upon the cross. For since there was death from the serpent, by the likeness of the serpent death is symbolized. The bite of the serpent was deadly; the death of the Lord was life-giving...In the death of Christ death died; since life, having died, killed death, the fullness of life swallowed up death; death was swallowed up in the body of Christ". (*Tractates on John*)

IV. John 3:22-36

1. Thus far, we have seen two Jewish responses to Jesus. In 2:13-22 “the Jews” reject Jesus and demand a sign from him. In 3:1-15 Nicodemus makes a movement toward Jesus but is unwilling to go beyond what he knows. Here we see John the Baptist providing a witness to Jesus.
2. Jesus and the disciples now leave Jerusalem for the “Judean countryside” (3:22) and Jesus resumes his ministry of baptizing (the imperfect tense of the verb in 3:22 makes this clear). Meanwhile, John the Baptist is also baptizing (at a location probably in Samaria). 3:24 provides a chronological note: all of this took place before John was put in prison (by Herod Antipas).
3. Some of John’s disciples engage in a discussion over purification with “a Jew” (3:23). We are not given any details about this, but two possibilities present themselves: (1) There is a dispute about whether baptism is a means of purification or (2) There is confusion over whose baptism effects purification, John or Jesus’. John’s disciples provide an interesting piece of information. At one point, Jesus was with John and involved in his ministry (3:26). Now, they report, “all are going to him”. As John’s disciples see it, Jesus is now a competitor who threatens to push John into eclipse.
4. John’s witness to Jesus begins in 3:27. He says, correctly, that with respect to God no one has anything to offer unless God has given it to them. John makes it clear that both he and Jesus have received authority from God but that the authority Jesus has received is far greater than his. John also makes it clear that he is not the Christ but was simply sent by God “before him” (3:28). John knows his place in the larger plan of God’s designs—he knows that he is not the center of these designs.
5. John’s central witness to Jesus involves the use of nuptial imagery (like 2:1-12). The Old Testament often presents God’s relationship to Israel as being nuptial (Isaiah 62:4-5; Hosea 2:21). What John means in 3:29 is that Jesus, not he, is the head of the New Israel. Jesus has the Bride (New Israel/Church) while John is simply the bridegroom. John may be referring to actual wedding practice. The bridegroom accompanied the groom until such time as the bride and groom were married and then he departed. Jesus is taking possession of the New Israel/Church and so it is time for him to depart. He has played a role on the unfolding drama, but he is not its culmination. Far from being sad at being displaced (or exiting the stage), John rejoices at the arrival of the bridegroom (3:29). Not only does he rejoice, but his joy is “complete” (fulfilled, brought to fullness). Like Mary, John is another figure who hears and responds to the word of Jesus. Faith leads to joy and it works against human blindness and hardness of heart: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:30).
6. 3:31-35 seems to be the narrator’s comment. This comment has to do with the dynamics of revelation. The One who reveals God “comes from above” and so is “above all” (3:31). We have already seen this in 1:18. The one who is “of earth” can know or offer a truth that is beyond the world. For this reason, only the Son can reveal the Truth for he “bears witness to what he has seen and heard” (3:32). The truth of what he reveals, and the truth of his origin are in no way undermined by the failure of people to believe. The human acceptance of revelation is not what renders it true. The Son does two fundamental things which no human agent can do: he speaks the “words of God” and he “gives the Spirit without measure”. The Son is himself the Father’s own spoken Word (and in this sense he is not a mere prophet) and he can impart the Spirit in his full reality.

7. There is a bond of love between the Father and the Son and all that the Father has has been entrusted to the Son (3:35). The use of the term “Son” should not lead us to think of the Son as inferior to the Father; Father and Son are distinct but equal. The Word which the Son speak is such that its acceptance (in faith and obedience) leads to eternal life. What is received from this Word is not information but Life. The refusal to receive this Word results not in Life but in wrath—the constant opposition that God directs against sin. 3:33 provides an important insight into faith. To believe testimony is to accept the truthfulness of God. Faith is faith in the trustworthiness of God. Of course, this means that lack of belief is the refusal to trust God and involves holding the view that God is untruthful. This is why unbelief is met with wrath.