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## Jesus' Grand Offer of Life

*John 3:1-36*

### **CAPITOL BIBLE STUDY** **201st General Assembly**

- **TUESDAY (SESSION) @ 8:00 AM**  
**IN ROOM 203, RYAN BLDG.**
- **WEDNESDAY (SESSION) @ 1:00 PM**  
**IN LIBRARY, RYAN BLDG.**

Capitol Commission Bible studies are held on Tuesday and Wednesday. The legislator Bible study meets from 8:00-8:45 AM in Room 203, Ryan Bldg. (during session weeks). An open-to-all Bible study meets from 1:00-1:30 PM in the Library, Ryan Bldg. (during session weeks). The Bible studies are nonpartisan and non-denominational, and our studies will focus on the Gospel of John for the 2017 General Assembly.

– Jeff Whitebread, Pennsylvania State Minister, Capitol Commission

### **John 3:1-38: “Celebrating a Life”**

When I was getting married, I could not locate my birth certificate.

This can happen when one moves often, which was the case when I was single. I'm not sure if it had been accidentally thrown away; maybe I put it in a very safe place, so safe in fact, that it was never found.

Since it didn't turn up, I was forced to get a replacement, which showed when and where I was born and allowed me to get a marriage license. Naturally though, a birth certificate is not needed to show a birth took place. Here, I am, an actual person who is living and breathing. I must have been born.

When Christians talk about the new or second birth, or the birth from above, they often forget this. For those who experience entry into the Christian faith in huge and traumatic ways, they are easily tempted to think this is the focal point of what it means to be a Christian, as if all that God wants is to give people a singular wonderful spiritual experience.

This is much like displaying one's birth certificate on the wall, and insisting on showing it to everyone who comes into the house. The thing that matters is not that you were born once upon a time. What is important is that the life you presently live, day-by-day, moment-by-moment is one of health and strength and purpose. Normally, you will not spend the rest of your life talking about what a difficult birth you had, you get on with being the person you now are.

### **God's Reign and Rule in Action**

*(John 3:3)* - At the heart of Jesus' response to Nicodemus is an offer of a new life, a life birthed by the Spirit of God, a life that allows us to step into the kingdom. As a result, entering the kingdom and seeing the kingdom is understood in the dynamic sense. It is God's rule in

action. Jesus is not announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God, for that is certainly old news as seen in Psalm 91:1 which says, “the Lord reigns.”

What Jesus was announcing was the new accessibility of the kingdom, through a rebirth from above. The Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family. What mattered was being a child of Abraham, but now, through Jesus, God is starting a new family in which ordinary birth is not enough. In being born over again, born from above, the doors of the kingdom are thrown wide open – and all are welcome.

*(John 3:5)* - Born of the water and the Spirit, this double birth of the water and the Spirit is the necessary requirement needed to enter into the reign and rule of God - or for that matter, to even catch a glimpse of it. The flesh, which stands for human effort or arrangements based on family, tribe, organization, or system is not enough. The two-fold baptism of water which identifies one with the kingdom movement started by John the Baptist and continued by Jesus' disciples, and the baptism of the spirit; this is the new life - bubbling up from within - that Jesus offers to those who would place their confidence in him.

*(John 3:8)* - We need to understand that strange things started to take place with this new availability to the kingdom that caused the religious leaders great concern. The Spirit is on the move, like a fresh breeze blowing, and opening the window and letting that breeze in can be very inconvenient, especially for those of Nicodemus' world. We find this in Luke 16:16 when Jesus describes the new availability of the kingdom, “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it.” In the past, lepers would run the other way shouting “unclean, unclean”. But now, because of Jesus, the lepers run toward him and are healed, those who are far from God are forcing their way right into the kingdom through access to, and confidence in Jesus.

*(John 3:11)* - The gospel is a dangerous message; here, we are encountering the first of many passages that speak of a new knowledge, a new sort of knowing. It must have been humbling for Nicodemus to have been told this; since he was, after all, a respected and senior teacher. But this new way of knowing, and the knowledge that we get through it, is only accessible by the ‘son of man’. He is, as we have been told earlier the place where heaven and earth intersect, he is the ladder which joins the two dimensions of God's world, the heavenly and earthly. If we desire to understand the way God is joining heaven and earth together, we must listen to Jesus, walk with him, and become his students in kingdom living.

# Jesus' Grand Offer of Life (cont'd) - *John 3:1-36*

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## Jesus, the Cross, and the Life of God

**(John 3:14)** - Jesus is referencing an incident described in Numbers 25:5-8. During the Israelite's wilderness wanderings, the people grumbled against Moses and were punished by poisonous snakes entering the camp, and killing many. God gave Moses a remedy. He was to make a bronze snake and place it on a pole and hold it up for the people to look at. Anyone who looked at the snake entwined on the pole would live.

The bronze serpent was from this point forward, stored in the Tabernacle as a sacred object. It remained until the time of King Hezekiah who broke it to pieces because he discovered the people worshipping it (2 Kings 18:4). During Jesus time, one Jewish writer found it necessary to emphasize that what saved the Israelites wasn't the artifact, but the saving power of God.

This is the only place in the New Testament where the bronze serpent is referred to. Here it points clearly to the death of Jesus. As Moses put the serpent on a pole, and lifted it up so people could see it; so, the son of man must be lifted up, that everyone who places their confidence in him may have eternal life. Humankind, as a whole, has been bitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the son of man dying on the cross, and find life through believing in him.

How can the crucifixion of Jesus be like putting a snake on a pole? Wasn't the snake the problem, not the solution. Surely, he is not suggesting that Jesus was like the poisonous snake that had been attacking the people. What John is saying is that the evil which was and is in the world, deep-rooted within all of us, was allowed, to take out its full force on Jesus. When we look at Jesus hanging on the cross, what we are looking at is the consequence of the evil which has a home in every human heart. And in Jesus, being "lifted up," as John will say several more times in this account, we are witnessing what God is like. We are seeing the lengths that God would go to free his people from the devastating effects of going our own way,

**(John 3:16)** - This being "lifted up", this giving is who God is and how God works, it is his nature and character. It is the foundation upon which the world we live in was created. The cross wasn't a messy accident, it wasn't God letting the worst happen to someone else. The cross, for John, is the essence of a new picture of God, it is God the Son dying under the weight of the world's evil, and is the ultimate ladder set up between heaven and earth.

Here is the reality that we find ourselves in today. Evil isn't instantly healed. Because evil lurks deep within us, healing can only take place when we are involved in the process. This doesn't mean we try a lot harder to be good, it means we set our attention and affection upon Jesus. All we can do, just like the Israelites, is to look and trust. We must gaze upon Jesus, to see him as the cross reveals him to be, the full display of God's redeeming love, and count on him for the undying life of God.

**(John 3:18)** - This opens a great division, which John described earlier as light and darkness. Believing in Jesus brings us into the light, the radiance of God's new creation. In not believing we remain in the darkness. The darkness is not condemned, because it offends some arbitrary laws which God made up for the fun of it. It must be condemned because evil is destroying and defacing the present world, and it prevents people from coming forward into God's new world. The point of the story is that you don't have to be condemned. You don't have to let the snake kill you. God's action in the crucifixion of Jesus planted a sign in the middle of history. And the sign proclaims this: believe and live.

## John Won't Steal the Bride

**(John 3:22)** - John draws upon the image of a friend to the bridegroom as he speaks cheerfully about the success that Jesus and his disciples seem to be having in baptizing people. In the text, we find a contrast between the expectation of John's disciples and Jesus' actual ministry. As Jesus withdraws to spend some time investing in his closest companions, his ministry still grows, seemingly, without direct effort.

**(John 3:24)** - While John the Baptizer continues to baptize, the disciples of John are bothered that Jesus' following was expanding and overshadowing that of their Rabbi. This escalates into a full-blown argument when a certain Jew, perhaps just one person, probably asserts that Jesus is the greater person and his baptism is the one necessary to be received. Finally, they turn to John to get some clarity. He not only responds to their query that it doesn't matter, but informs them that this is the way it should be. John understood it was Jesus who needed to carry on God's purposes. He had done what he was sent to do, and he compares it to being the "best man" in a wedding; and that he had no intention of stealing the bride from the groom at the last minute.

One of the things this gospel seeks to emphasize is the way in which different characters in the story of Jesus have to learn, as C.S. Lewis once said, to play great parts without pride and small parts without shame.

**(John 3:31)** - This last paragraph is likely the writer's comments on this chapter. When encountering this type of passage, it is the writer's way of asking one to prayerfully consider; "Where are you in this picture?", "Who are you trusting in?", and "Is your confidence in the message of those who show no sign of life from the hidden dimension of God's world?"

### Book referenced:

Wright, NT. John for Everyone. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2004

**Legislator Bible study:** Tuesday, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 27<sup>th</sup> at 8 AM, Room 203 - Ryan Office Building  
**Open-To-All Bible Study:** Wednesday, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>th</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> at 1 PM, Library - Ryan Office Building