



**John 2:12 -3:21**

**Notes by Jonathan Herron**

### **CLEANSING THE TEMPLE**

**John 2:12 - 22**

The passage we will now study begins in the wake of the beautiful miracle in Cana of Galilee, and we must view it with that in mind. Jesus had been to a wedding, and when the wine ran out, He changed the water into wine. The message of that miracle is that when the natural joys of life wear out, our Lord brings new wine — new joys. When the steward tasted the wine, he said, “*You have kept the good wine until now.*” That is how it is when we follow Christ; the best is always yet to come! As we grow in Him, the joys and wines of life become more perfect and more satisfying.<sup>1</sup>

Now notice verse 12:

*After this He went down to Capernaum, with His mother and brothers and His disciples, and they stayed there a few days.*

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Preaching the Word: John, That You May Believe.* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1999). 68.

After the first sign of turning water into wine, Jesus journeyed from Cana to Capernaum, also in Galilee. Capernaum was about twenty miles from Cana, so it was not much of a journey to get there. There according to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) He had an extensive ministry. At this point, Jesus' family was apparently still supportive of Him. Later they would reject Him.

It was almost Passover, and there was a spirit of expectancy across the land — probably very much like what we experience during the Christmas season. The Jewish tradition required an entire month for preparation. The roads were repaired, the bridge rebuilt or shored up, the sepulchers rewhitened. The entire land bustled with the spirit of Passover. Jerusalem, although not a big city by ordinary standards, would have as many as two and a quarter million people crowded into its confines at Passover. So it is very natural to read in verse 13, *“The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”*

After an unspecified time in Capernaum, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. John's calling it “the Passover of the Jews” (v. 13) is an indication that his Gospel was written primarily for Gentile (non-Jewish) readers. This is one of the three Passovers directly mentioned in John's Gospel (2:13; 6:4; 13:1), which helps us determine that Jesus' public ministry lasted about three years.

As Jesus traveled south toward Jerusalem, the roads would have become more congested. When He entered the gates of the city and approached the Temple, the congestion would have been even worse, with sellers of trinkets and souvenirs on all sides. Some of that must have bothered Jesus, but not as much as what He saw in the Temple.

When Jesus arrives at the Temple in Jerusalem, He found them selling oxen, sheep, and pigeons there, as well as changing money. The “temple” refers to the whole Temple complex which was composed of several courts. This was all happening in the Court of the Gentiles, which was as far into the Temple that a non-Jew could enter.

Many of the people coming to the Passover had traveled long distances. The selling of the animals used for sacrifice was a convenience. They would not have to bring the sacrificial animals with them. And animals that may have started out in good shape may not have been without blemish by the time they reached Jerusalem and the Temple.

In addition, only a certain coin was acceptable for payment of the Temple tax. The money changers changed the foreign coins that people had brought from many foreign places to the “official” coins accepted for use in the Temple. Authorities tell us that the money changers charged as much as two hours of a working man’s wage to change a half shekel. They charged the same amount again for every half shekel they gave in return for a larger coin. So if a man came in with a two-shekel piece, he would have had to pay an entire day’s wage just to change his money! This brought a lot of money into the Temple.

When Jesus saw this religious circus taking place in the one place in the Temple where compassion for the Gentiles should have been shown, He was incensed. The Lamb became a Lion! Taking a whip of cords made from cords that had tied things together or even from reeds or shucks, He chased them from the Temple court (v. 15). Chasing oxen, sheep, pigeons, and traders before Him, turning over the tables of the money changers, and pouring out their coins, Jesus charged them with making the House of God a house of trade. Notice He called it “My

Father's House" (v. 16), thus indicating something of His unique Sonship. The disciples recalled a Scripture verse from Psalm 69:9 as they saw Jesus' zeal in cleansing the Temple.

Christ's anger was rooted in His reaction against the religious irreverence of the Jews toward God the Father. But we must first realize the significance of the setting in this passage. 1 Kings 8:10-11 describes the Temple of Solomon when the ark of the covenant was brought in. A thick cloud so filled the Temple that the priests could no longer minister there. That was the glory of God! To glorify God was the very purpose of the Temple. Therefore the sin of the money changers and the religious authorities lay in the fact that while they loudly proclaimed the holiness and otherness of God, they denied it in practice. Our Lord's whip opposes anything that detracts from the communication of God's glory, especially in worship.<sup>2</sup>

When the loss of the knowledge of who God is settles in, an irreverent spirit begins to take root in our lives, and such an attitude restricts our ability to worship. A.W. Tozer, in the preface of his book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, explains why he wrote that book:

*With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words, 'Be still, and know that I am God,' mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper in the middle period of the twentieth-century.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>3</sup> Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 13.

Our hearts can also become like that outer court of the Temple of Jerusalem. Even while we sit in church, the bustle of suburbia can be spinning through our heads. We may be thinking about the next business deal we are going to close, athletic events that await us, shopping trips, or parties. Solomon said it all when he said in Proverbs 5:14, “*I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.*” It is possible to be almost in ‘utter ruin’ even while we are part of a Bible-based church.

The Synoptic Gospels also record a cleansing of the Temple by Jesus. However, they place it in the last week of Jesus’ life as one of the events leading up to His death. John has put it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as His first public act. By placing this moment at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, John is indicating that there was always tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. From the very start He had thrown down a gauntlet and issued a challenge before them. At all points in His public ministry Jesus was on trial before them — which He turned to use as a trial of them before God’s truth.

Obviously upset by what He had done, the Jewish leaders, who would have been the Sadducees who had control over the Temple, demanded to know His authority for such an action (i.e. “Show us your credentials”). They wanted a sign to show where He had the power to disrupt their dealings. Interestingly enough, they did not ask *why* He had done it, only by what authority He had done it (v. 18).

Jesus’ answer was a rather cryptic remark about destroying the Temple and He would rebuild it in three days (v. 19). This would later be used against Him in His trial (Mark 14:58). His questioners took Him literally and answered that the Temple had been in the process of being rebuilt since Herod had undertaken the project forty-six years before. It would not be officially

completed until AD 64. How could He rebuild it in three days? Only after the Resurrection could they look back at that statement and realize what Jesus had in mind. Jesus took their literal reply to His statement and used it to drive home a spiritual truth about His own body and mission.

When Jesus cleansed the Temple, he also introduced a new kind of worship. They had substituted convenience for compassion and sacrifice for submission to the will of God. Jesus showed them that the Father demanded sincerity and truth in worship. In essence they had destroyed the Temple by their perversion of worship. But when the Temple which was Christ's body would be destroyed by their crucifixion of Him, after three days it would be resurrected to form the body of Christ, the Church, by which God would truly be known. All persons in the world could know God through the resurrected Christ without the limitations imposed by the Temple which they were protecting.

Some of the people who were at the Passover feast in Jerusalem believed in Jesus (v. 23). But these were superficial believers who believed in Him because of the signs that they had seen Him do. Impressed by the signs, they believed.

But even though they believed in Him, Jesus did not believe in them. Jesus refused to commit Himself to them (v. 24). Knowing human nature as He did, He knew that their belief was a superficial belief that would not last. He did not need anyone to interpret to Him the commitment of persons; He knew the human heart too well for that.

My doctoral professor shared with me this truth: *A friend of mine pastors a multi-site church of 4,000 people in the Albany, New York area. I like his church's mission statement: "More and better disciples." More without better will not endure adversity like pandemics. This*

*is why Life Church always conveys that God's revealed truth in the Bible is our final authority. After all, Jesus said, "He who hears My word and does it like a wise man who built his house upon the rock" (Matthew 7).*

## **BEING BORN AGAIN**

### **John 3:1-8**

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (v.1).*

One of the primary characteristics of the Pharisees was their seriousness. They were so zealous for their faith that on the Sabbath they would carry no more food than the weight of a dried fig or no more milk than could be swallowed at one gulp lest they break the Sabbath-rest. They were very serious about their faith!

Nicodemus was "a ruler of the Jews," meaning he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a group of seventy men, both lay and clerical, who had jurisdiction over every Jew on earth. In addition, our Lord's identification of Nicodemus in 3:10 as "the teacher of Israel" may mean Nicodemus was considered to be the greatest teacher in Jerusalem, like a modern-day Dr. Jordan Petersen. There is some evidence Nicodemus came from a very aristocratic family that traced its bloodline back to the Maccabees.

Nicodemus was no fool. He was an educated man and an aristocrat. These things — his earnestness, his position, and his education coupled with the fact that he ultimately did respond to Christ (see John 7:50-52; 19:38-39) — make his life a perfect case study for learning the

essentials of salvation. Our Lord could talk to Nicodemus in highly symbolic, compacted language that would have fallen futilely on the ears of the average man on the street. Jesus here gives us a dynamic explanation that would perhaps not have been spoken to anyone except a man like Nicodemus.

On that quiet Palestinian evening, a perplexed man moved along the serpentine backstreets of old Jerusalem to talk to a young rabbi. It was the greatest meeting of his life — a supreme experience. He was about to be face-to-face with Jesus.

*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.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (vv. 2-3).*

As Nicodemus approached Jesus in conversation, he came respectfully, using the honored title of “Rabbi.” He was prepared for an exchange of philosophical ideas, but he was not prepared for what followed. Jesus cut him off and went straight to the heart of the matter. In a glorious instant the vocabulary of our faith was given one of its greatest concepts — “born again.” Nicodemus pondered one of the greatest subjects possible to a man, and his wheels began to turn.

Nicodemus knew exactly what was going on when Jesus said he needed to be “born again.” The Jewish rabbis of the day had a saying: “A proselyte who embraces Judaism is like a



newborn child.” All things were completely new to them, and old connections were destroyed. When Nicodemus heard Jesus’ words, he knew what Jesus was saying.

*“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 4).*

It was with wistful yearning that Nicodemus said, “You talk about being ‘born again,’ you talk about that radical, fundamental change that is so necessary. I know it is necessary, but what I question is how. There is nothing I would like more. But you might as well tell me that as a full-grown man I need to go back inside my mother’s womb and be born all over again. Oh, how I long for that new birth! Oh, how I desire that.”

That is the heart cry of mankind. We desire to change. We want to be different, to be better. We want new minds with new personalities. We want to be born again.

*Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (v. 5).*

Again Nicodemus knew what Jesus meant. He realized that at that very time John the Baptizer was baptizing people in water as a symbol of their inward repentance. We read about this in 3:23. What flashed across Nicodemus’ mind was: “Except you are born of all that water baptism signifies, which is repentance, and that which Spirit baptism accomplishes, which is regeneration, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” In other words, Nicodemus saw very

clearly that no one is born again if there is no repentance; and along with repentance comes a work of the Spirit in the heart. These are the nonnegotiables of being born again.

The Scriptures teach that there is no new birth without repentance. What does repentance mean? Repentance involves a change of the mind. The bilabial word comes from two words — one that means “after” and another that means “thought” or “mind.” When there is repentance, there is a change of action coupled with a change of mind. It is not simply a new direction or an about-face. It is not education. It is not a religious experience.

Being born again is a radical change that takes place in a person’s life whereby through repentance and a work of the Spirit he is given a new nature. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”* And 2 Peter 1:4 adds, *“So that... you may become partakers of the divine nature.”*

Our Lord further explained this radical change in verse 6-7:

*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.”*

The radical change is not something that can be accomplished by human energy.

*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 (v. 8).*

“Nicodemus, being born of the Spirit is like your experience with the wind. You can see the wind’s effect, but not the wind itself.” With those who are born again, the effects of the Spirit are visible in their lives, even though the Spirit cannot be seen.

## “HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE?”

### John 3:9 - 21

We see Nicodemus’ final question in verse 9: *“How can these things be?”* That is, “I see your analogies, but how does this new birth happen? What is the force behind being born again? Where does it spring from? What does it mean for our lives?” As Jesus began to Nicodemus, He skillfully led up to the main thrust. Notice verse 10, where Jesus gently chides Nicodemus: *“Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”* In other words, “You have all of this learning and yet you do not understand?”

*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 (v. 11).*

Then Jesus added, *“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man”* (vs. 12 - 13). Jesus was saying, “My authority comes from the fact that I came from Heaven.”

With that Jesus elected to give what is possibly the greatest illustration from the Hebrew Testament of what the new birth means — the dynamics behind the spiritual life.

*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life (vs. 14 - 15).*

With those words Nicodemus' mind spun back thousands of years to what is recorded in Numbers 21. With this reference 'the teacher of Israel' was on familiar ground.

*From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

Scholars believe the serpents that are designated here as 'fiery serpents' were so called because their bite inflicted a burning fever that, if not checked, brought death.

The picture is one of both horror and glory. It is horrible in that the Israelites were beset by a hoard of 'fiery serpents,' so many that the people could not escape, and as a result their

bodies were inflamed with fever and they were on the verge of death. In fact, many died. But at the same time it was a glorious scene because here we see God's glorious provision of healing. Jesus left no doubt about the application: "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*" This is a picture of a dying, sinful world with the atoning cross raised high.

The details of the analogy are remarkable. The snakes are symbolic of sin — in fact, the perfect symbol of sin because it was a serpent that tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, thereby bringing sin into the world. Our very natures have been polluted. Paul says, "*None is righteous, no, not one,*" (Romans 3:10; cf. Psalm 14:1-3). Then we see the likeness of a serpent lifted up on a pole. It is significant that Moses elected not to use an actual serpent. The symbolism would not have been so exact and perfect if he had. Jesus became sin (or a serpent) for us. Romans 8:3 says, "*God... sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin... condemned sin in the flesh.*" 2 Corinthians 5:21 adds, "*For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*" And Galatians 3:13 states, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.*"

With all the animal realm from which to choose, God chose the perfect symbol — the serpent. Our Lord on the cross took the sin of the world upon Himself as symbolized by the writhing serpent.

We dare not miss the importance of the gaze of faith. Numbers 21:9 says, "*And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*" The command to look to that uplifted serpent was a gracious foreshadowing of looking to Christ for our salvation. Moses raised that serpent up high in the camp, and all the dying Israelites had to do was look to that

pole to be saved. No matter how horribly they were bitten, no matter how many time they had been bitten or how sick they were, the opportunity for salvation was there. Even the most degraded and miserable sinner who looks to Christ will be saved.

The great illustration of the serpent was followed by the greatest of explanations, perhaps the most famous Bible verse of all time. Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the gospel in miniature.”

*For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16, CSB).*

John 3:16 shows us the greatness of God’s love, that it is a vast, unbounded, bottomless sea! That is the heart of the gospel! It is not simply “God is love,” but “*God loved the world in this way: He gave.*” That is what lies at the root of the new birth. “Nicodemus, do you want to understand how this can be? It is through the overflowing, bottomless love of God.”

The message of the Bible is a simple message about God’s love and mercy, about man’s sin and need, and about the rescue that’s found in Jesus Christ. In simple words Sally Lloyd-Jones captures the love of God demonstrated in the death of Jesus Christ:

*“So you’re a king, are you?” The Roman soldiers jeered. “Then you’ll need a crown and a robe.”*

*They gave Jesus a crown made out of thorns. And put a purple robe on Him. And pretended to bow down to Him. “Your Majesty!” they said.*

*Then they whipped Him. And spat on Him. They didn't understand that this was the Prince of Life, the King of heaven and earth, who had come to rescue them.*

*The soldiers made Him a sign — "Our King" and nailed it to a wooden cross.*

*They walked back up a hill outside the city. Jesus carried the cross on His back. Jesus had never done anything wrong. But they were going to kill Him the way criminals were killed.*

*They nailed Jesus to the cross.*

*"Father, forgive them," Jesus gasped. "They don't understand what they're doing."*

*"You say you've come to rescue us!" people shouted. "But you can't even rescue Yourself!"*

*But they were wrong. Jesus could have rescued Himself. A legion of angels would have flown to His side — if He'd called.*

*"If you were really the Son of God, you could just climb down off that cross!" they said.*

*And of course they were right. Jesus could have just climbed down. Actually, He could have just said a word and made it all stop. Like when He healed that little girl. And stilled the storm. And fed five thousand people.*

*But Jesus stayed.*

*You see, they didn't understand. It wasn't the nails that kept Jesus there. It was love.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Sally. *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name*. (ZonderKidz, 2006). 302-306.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are we to believe about Jesus from these passages?
2. How would you describe God to someone who has never heard of Him?
3. How is the death of Jesus a direct result of God's love for us?
4. What reasons do you have for confidence in God's love?
5. In what ways might John 3:16 change how you view and respond to sin in your own life?
6. How has the gift of Jesus changed your life and your eternity?
7. How do those who place their faith in Jesus mirror the Israelites afflicted by serpents in the wilderness?