

o6. ACT II : SHARING IN THE NEW COVENANT
John 3:1 - 4:54



Ettore Masina, Jesus of Nazareth, Libreria Borgo, Rome, 1977.

Scene 1: What the clearing of the temple means for the Jews (3:1-21)

John 3:1-2

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night.

The stage is in darkness except for the light where Jesus stands centre-stage, alone. Gradually we discern another figure moving in the dark towards Jesus. We are told that it is Nicodemus and that he is a leader of the Jews (a member of their governing council, the Sanhedrin, see 7:50). We have just learned that the Law is bereft of wine (2:3). The temple has been cleared (2:15). Where are they to go who have relied on the Law and the temple? John is inviting them to come with Nicodemus to Jesus.



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John 3:2

Nicodemus said to Jesus, “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.”

Nicodemus is one of those already mentioned in 2:23 who have witnessed Jesus’ **signs**. He has come to the first stage of belief, recognising Jesus as ‘a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you’ (Acts 2:22).

John 3:3

Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God (only in this passage) without being born from above (ἄνωθεν).”

Already in the Prologue we have learned that those to whom the Word gives power to become children of God ‘are born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God’ (1:12-13).

John 3:4

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?”

Like the Jews after Jesus had cleared the temple (see John 2:20) Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus. ἄνωθεν (‘from above’) can also mean ‘again’. This enables John to clarify Jesus’ meaning.

John 3:5

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

Luke demonstrates how **being born of water and the Spirit** was experienced by the community of Jesus’ disciples, when he describes how Paul acted when he encountered some disciples of the Baptist in Ephesus. Paul said, “John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” Luke continues: ‘On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied’ (Acts 19:4-6).

John 3:5

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

The water symbolises their sharing in the cleansing and life-giving communion with Jesus as they are welcomed into the body of Jesus’ disciples.

They experience Jesus’ Spirit as they experience Jesus’ prayer and joy as they are drawn to share Jesus’ communion with God.

John 3:6-8

What is born of the flesh is flesh. What is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you (plural), ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind (πνεῦμα) blows where it chooses, and you (singular) 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 (πνεύματος).”

To open us to welcome God’s grace, Jesus shares with us his faith, his hope and his love, along with the intimacy of his prayer-communion with God: the Spirit of love that he shares with God.

John 3:9-10

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

A ‘teacher of Israel’ should have known of the hopes expressed by Isaiah when he looked forward to the time when ‘a spirit from on high is poured out on us’ (Isaiah 32:15). He should have known of the promise made through the prophet Joel: ‘I will pour out my spirit on all flesh’ (Joel 2:28), as well as the word of God spoken through Ezekiel: ‘I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all that makes you unclean, 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’ (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

John 3:11

Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you (plural) do not receive our testimony.

As frequently in John we are listening to the kinds of debate that went on between Christians ('we') and Jews ('you') in the community that produced this Gospel.

This is the 'we' of the community of the Beloved Disciple: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it' (1 John 1:1-2).

John 3:12

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

What he has said to this point can, to some extent, be expressed through human analogies and grasped by human understanding. In this sense it can be said to be ‘**earthly**’. By comparison, what he is about to say is ‘**heavenly**’. It can be grasped only by one who is ‘**born from above**’. John is proclaiming to the Jews of his day, and has Jesus here proclaiming to Nicodemus, that they will never be able to receive Jesus’ revelation till they are willing to let go whatever is blinding them to his light and closing their hearts to his love. Without such a conversion we will never be able to penetrate to the heart of what God is revealing in Jesus, to ‘**heavenly things**’.

John 3:13

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man (see 1:51).

Notice the post-resurrection perspective. The Jesus who is speaking here is the Jesus who is alive with God (‘**ascended into heaven**’). He is present with us continuing the mission given him by God (‘**descended from heaven**’).

Jesus speaks of what he knows and he testifies to what he experiences in the intimacy of love which he has with God as the 'only Son who is close to the Father's heart'. It is because of this experience that he can make God known. It is as the '**Son of Man**' that he experiences God, as one who shares our human condition in all its vulnerability and brokenness and who identifies with the poor and oppressed, knowing that he and they will be vindicated by God's judgment (see 1:51)

John 3:14-15

Just 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.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the story of the healing (salvation) given by God to those who gazed upon the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness by Moses (Numbers 21:4-9). He then goes on to tell Nicodemus and ‘the Jews’ whom Nicodemus represents that they will see God revealed only when they gaze upon the ‘**Son of Man**’ when he is ‘**lifted up**’.

John 3:14-15

The lifting up includes a reference to the crucifixion. As Jesus will declare in a later scene: ‘When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself’ (12:32). Jesus has spoken of the need to be ‘born of water and the Spirit’. It is to highlight the importance of Jesus’ self-giving on the cross that the author of the First Letter speaks of water and Spirit ‘and blood’ (1 John 5:6,8), for ‘the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin’ (1John 1:7).

The chorus: John 3:16-17

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. 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.

The love of God for the world is revealed in his giving his only Son – a theme repeated in the First Letter of John: ‘God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (1 John 4:9-10). ‘The Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world’ (1 John 4:14). Paul, too, tells us: ‘God did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us’ (Romans 8:32). ‘The Son of God loves me and gives himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

The theme of love is central to John's Gospel (the verb ἀγαπάω occurs thirty-seven times and the noun ἀγάπη occurs seven times). Though almost all references to love occur in the second part of the Gospel commencing chapter thirteen, it is appropriate that the word first appear here in this text when John is speaking of God's giving God's Self in giving Jesus.

God's love is not reserved for a chosen few; it is for 'the world' - for the whole of the created universe. God sent his Son 'that the world might be saved through him'. John has been insisting on the universal ('catholic') dimension of God's creative and redemptive will from the beginning of the Prologue. Everything that exists owes its being to God's Word (1:3). Life and light are offered to all (1:4). Jesus is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29). We have just heard Jesus say that whoever believes in him will have eternal life (3:15). No one is excluded from the offer of life. It is an offer made to each of us, an offer we accept by opening our hearts to share his love-communion with God.

The chorus: John 3:18

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

We might stand condemned by our own conscience for the ways in which we have rejected love and sinned against life itself. We may be condemned, and justly so, by others. But John assures us that God will not condemn us. ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’ (3:17).

We find this same assurance on the lips of Jesus: ‘I came not to judge the world, but to save the world’ (12:47). If we are condemned it is because we ‘**have rejected belief in the name of the only Son of God.**’

If we are condemned, it is not by God. It is because we ‘**love darkness rather than light**’ (John 3:19). If we are condemned, it is because, being unwilling to have our evil exposed to the light, we have chosen to reject him who is the light of the world and have remained obstinate in refusing God’s love.

Herein lies the importance of our being committed to resisting sin in all its forms. For true belief necessarily produces a harvest of obedience and love. The author of the First Letter of John insists on this: ‘I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin’ (1 John 2:1). However, if we find that we sin, we are not to despair: ‘If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world’ (1 John 2:1-2).

The chorus: John 3:19-21

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.”

We have been watching Nicodemus come ‘by night’ to Jesus (3:2). Jesus’ arms are open, welcoming everyone to undertake the same journey. As we listen to him we are learning what it means to believe. We must ‘**come to the light**’. We must learn to ‘**do what is true**’, and to cease from ‘**deeds that are evil**’. If we come to Jesus and see him and stay with him (1:39), we will learn to live in such a way that all our deeds will be ‘**done in God**’, for it is the life of Jesus that we will be living.

Scene 2 : What the clearing of the temple means for the followers of the Baptist (3:22-36)

3:22-26

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptised. John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised – John had not yet been thrown into prison.

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. John's disciples 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."

John will clarify this later when he tells us that it was Jesus' disciples who were baptising, not Jesus himself (4:2).

John 3:27-30

John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ 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. He must increase, but I must decrease.”



John the Baptist, Deesis Icon

We are meant to recall the marriage feast at Cana (2:1-10). The Baptist knows that Jesus is the one who, through the gift of the Spirit, brings about the purification, the need for which is symbolised by the baptism which the Baptist has been carrying out, and by the Jewish rites of purification.

Theophraktos, an Eastern monk, writing towards the close of the 11th century, has this comment:

‘Christ is also the Bridegroom of each soul, and the place where the marriage is celebrated and the union consummated is the place where we are baptised, namely the Church ... There is no other Bridegroom than Christ. Teachers, like the Baptist, are only friends of the Bridegroom. Only one distributes the gifts of grace, the Lord. All others are only servants employed to administer the gifts which the Lord gives.’

John 3:31-33

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. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true.

John laments the tragedy of those who fail to accept Jesus. ‘The Word was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him ... his own people did not accept him’ (1:10-11). In the Cana scene John portrayed Jesus as revealing God as the bridegroom pouring out the wine of the Spirit ‘without measure’, ‘**yet no one accepts his testimony**’. If we would only believe in the Son, we would see that ‘**God is true**’ (ἀληθής).

John 3:34-36

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

We can rely on God's word and the God revealed by Jesus is the one, true, God. If we would only believe in the Son, we would experience 'eternal life'. If we persist in refusing belief in the Son, if we 'disobey' and refuse to 'do whatever he tells', we 'must endure God's wrath'.

The expression ‘God’s wrath’ occurs frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. While recognising that much human suffering comes because people fail to do God’s will, the inspired authors still worked from an underlying assumption that everything that happens is in some way willed by God. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that disasters of all kinds and human suffering were understood to be punishments from God and expressions of divine anger.

God has willed human freedom and so has accepted the consequences of its misuse. Much of the bitterness, dislocation, violence and suffering that is so prevalent in human experience is the consequence of what John has named disobedience (3:36). When we reject the light we plunge ourselves and others into darkness. Rather than project anger onto God, ought we not look to our own and other people's behaviour? It is not God who is punishing us. We are experiencing the effects of human refusal to obey.

The suffering experienced by the innocent Jesus has also brought about a change in our assumptions concerning suffering. John has just been telling us that ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’ (3:17). In light of the revelation of God which we see in Jesus, ideas of a punishing and angry God have to be radically rethought.

In the New Testament, 'God's wrath' no longer refers to divine anger bringing punishment upon those who oppose his will. It retains the elements of fire and passion, but now it is understood as the passionate love of God in opposing evil in all its forms - especially sins against love.

'God's wrath' flows from God's commitment to love both the victims of oppression and its perpetrators.

God's love is a devouring fire. Everything that resists love must be purified in this fire and the purifying is necessarily painful. As we suffer this purification, we feel that God is angry with us, that he has turned his face away from us, that we are rejected. Our faith tells us that this is not true. When John speaks of 'God's wrath' he is describing in traditional language what happens when we resist the purifying love of God and lock ourselves within the horizon of our own stubbornness and disobedience. 'God's wrath' is the experience of impenetrable darkness in which we find ourselves when we shut out God's light. It is the incapacity we experience to give or receive love when we deliberately and persistently reject the love offered us by God.

To reject Jesus is to reject the one who sent him. To reject the Son is to reject the Father. It is to consign ourselves to eternal darkness, to the bitterness and frustration of choosing to exist apart from the source of all light, all life and all love. It is not God who is punishing us. It is we who are choosing to reject God's love and so are suffering the self-inflicted consequences of this rejection. God is not condemning us, but 'God is true' and God cannot and does not pretend that things are other than they really are. When all is revealed, we will be declared blessed if we have accepted grace; we will stand condemned if we have rejected it. John's warning is clear: **'whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath'**.

See also Paul: 'Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed' (Romans 2:4-5).

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