

THE REVEALER FROM HEAVEN

John 3:31-36

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He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. *John 3:31*

John chapter 3 is widely regarded as one of the great chapters of the Bible. It should be, because it presents concentrated teaching from Jesus himself on God's way of salvation. There is no greater question than what God plans for our salvation. In this chapter we have the answer provided by none less than God's own Son, who came into the world to reveal and accomplish that salvation. Therefore, what we make of Jesus' teaching – accepting it in sincere faith or rejecting it in unbelief – is the decisive issue in our lives.

It is fitting that John 3 concludes with words from John the Baptist. John was the one who introduced Jesus to his generation. And as Jesus now begins his ministry, John gives his enthusiastic support: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). In this concluding passage, John explains why Jesus is the one person who most deserves to be heard, believed, and followed. Whereas all others are earthly witnesses to God, Jesus Christ is uniquely the revealer from heaven, whose words truly hold the power of eternal life.

AN ABLE REVEALER

We remember that some of John's followers had complained that people were leaving him to follow Jesus. They did not realize that this was the very thing John most wanted; it was the purpose of his ministry to see people go to Jesus in faith. John's was a divinely-ordained ministry; he was a true prophet of the Lord. But

Jesus is uniquely exalted even above a prophet like John the Baptist. John explains: “He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all” (Jn. 3:31).

John asserts that Jesus possesses a personal authority that is greater than that of anyone else. Unlike everyone else who has ever taught about God, Jesus actually came into this world from heaven: “He who comes from heaven is above all.” This alludes to Jesus’ identity as the very Son of God – one of the most important truths the Gospel of John was written to reveal. The opening words of this Gospel inform us that Jesus is one with God and is therefore the true revelation of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). John sums up the significance of Jesus’ coming: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Because of who he is, Jesus possesses an authority that no one else has.

This was something that people were about to experience as Jesus began his ministry. It was around this time that Jesus preached his famous Sermon on the Mount, after which, Matthew tells us, “crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority” (Mt. 7:28-29). Jesus was not like the scholars of his time – and most times – who mainly recited the opinions of others. Instead, he revealed truth that he knew and had authority to proclaim as one sent from heaven to earth for that purpose.

Jesus spoke of things he knew firsthand: “He bears witness to what he has seen and heard” (Jn. 3:32). When we read Jesus’ teachings in the Bible, we are not dealing with mere speculation. That is what everyone else has to do, apart from direct inspiration from God. But Jesus, alone even among the true prophets, is an eye-witness of God and heaven. If you want to know about the Army, it is best to talk to someone who has served in the ranks. If you want to know about a family, the best source is a member of that family. Likewise, “if we want information about God, we will get it only from the Son of God; and if we want information about heaven and heaven’s life, we will only get it from Him who comes from heaven... Because Jesus alone knows God, he alone can give us the facts about God, and these facts

are the gospel.”¹ This is why there is no better source for truth about God and salvation than Jesus Christ, who came into this world from heaven to reveal such truths to mankind.

This answers a common objection to the Christian faith. Some say, “What makes Jesus so different? Aren’t all religious leaders basically the same: Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed or some other guru? The answer is No. Jesus Christ alone is the very Son of God who came into this world with firsthand truth from heaven. No other religion even claims to have such a leader, but the New Testament is explicit in teaching that Jesus is the Son of God who came from heaven.

Not only is Jesus a different kind of spiritual authority, but he also brings a different message. People ask, “Don’t all religions say basically the same thing?” The common opinion is that they do, but only because people have not seriously faced the message of Jesus Christ. This was John’s point in saying, “He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way” (Jn. 3:31). That is why, despite their important differences, every false religion – be it Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, or Roman Catholicism – teaches that we come to God at least in part by being good. This is what you will find in the writings of Mohammed and Confucius, in the popes and the rabbis. We must somehow merit entry into heaven. But Jesus and his apostles teach something entirely different. Nicodemus thought he was good, but Jesus told him, “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). The only way for anyone to be saved, Jesus said, was for “the Son of Man to be lifted up” (Jn. 3:14), by which he referred to his own death on the cross. Jesus alone teaches that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). Jesus taught that salvation is through faith, not by works.

This is not the kind of thing men imagine; it is not of the earth but of heaven. This produces an absolute antithesis between Christianity and every other religion. If Jesus is who he says he is, then his message is the only true one and must be accepted to the exclusion of every other. If Jesus is not who he says he is, then he is a monstrous fraud who must be rejected utterly. A Christian, therefore, is one who

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:145.

has seen the truth of Jesus in God's Word and accepts him to the exclusion of every other savior and lord.

John the Baptist reminds us that we all begin as those who are "of the earth" and therefore we tend to be earthly in our thinking. When you start studying the Bible, you will find it contradicting many things you have always assumed. Since Jesus is the one person who is able to reveal truth from heaven, we should hunger for his truth in order to correct the errors in which we have been trained, eager to advance from earthly to heavenly thinking through Christ's Word.

A WILLING REVEALER

In order to be an effective witness, one must not only be an *able* revealer but also one who is *willing*. It is often the case that the eye-witness in a criminal case is not willing to testify because he or she does not want to get involved. But Jesus was willing to come from heaven to earth to reveal God's truth to the world. John states this simply: "He bears witness to what he has seen and heard" (Jn. 3:32).

Jesus was highly motivated to teach God's Word. An episode in Mark's Gospel shows that Bible teaching was Jesus' top priority. He began going into the synagogues of Galilee to teach. While there he encountered a demon-possessed man and delivered him. Then Peter's mother-in-law had a fever, so Jesus went and healed her. As word of these healings spread, many sick and possessed people were brought, and Jesus ministered to them out of his compassion. As a result there was great excitement about his ministry and vast crowds began to form. Mark tells us that Jesus drew away to a quiet place to pray, but Peter came to get him to continue with the miracles. To Peter's mind, this was the way to build a great religious movement – by drawing attention with spectacular events. But Jesus disagreed. "He said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came'" (Mk. 1:38). The purpose of Jesus' ministry was to preach God's truth; this must be the focus of our ministry as well. Mark summarizes, "And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues" (Mk. 1:39).

Jesus is able and willing to reveal God's Word. The problem is that people are not willing to receive him. John says, "He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony" (Jn. 3:32). John means that comparatively few accept Jesus' teaching, since he goes on to speak about some who do. The point is that Jesus' teaching is generally rejected by the world. People have worldly attitudes and opinions that clash with Jesus' teaching so that they reject him. A. W. Pink explains that most people refuse Jesus because "the message is too heavenly for them. They have no relish for it. They have hearts only for things below."²

This is why so few people are in church. They have other things that interest them more. They prefer to watch the ball game rather than learn about God. They are making lists about work and this seems more important than the state of their immortal souls. They are occupied with trying to hit white balls into holes in the ground, which they find more edifying than worshiping the God of heaven. Man condemns himself by his lack of interest in God and salvation. When worldly society was forced to pay attention to Jesus it hated him and unjustly put him to death. Jesus said it plainly: "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (Jn. 3:19).

Do you see why faith in Christ is so important and valuable? Do you see why it is precious to God when his Word is preached and we believe in his Son? John says, "Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true" (Jn. 3:33). In the ancient world, people had signet rings that they used as seals. When they wanted to mark something they owned, or to affirm something as carrying their authority or approval, they set their seal to it in wax. That is what our faith does to God. It glorifies God when we believe in Jesus, for in doing so we affix our seal to his Word. George Hutchinson says, "Faith embracing the doctrine of Christ doth also glorify God by subscribing to the truth of his word, and doth, so far as believers can, ratify the truth of the word, that others may embrace it."³

² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 151.

³ George Hutchinson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 55.

This answers another objection to Christian faith. People argue that we cannot be sure of what Jesus meant when he taught so long ago, especially since his teaching is only preserved in the writings of the apostles. Our answer is that Jesus' revelation was a divine act of communication to us. This was not a merely human process, subject to human error. As the very Son of God, sent by the Father to reveal heavenly truth to the world, it was Jesus' purpose to communicate saving truth to the world – and that is what he has done. During his trial, Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth” (Jn. 18:37). The Son of God did not fail in that purpose. Our faith, then, is a seal testifying to Jesus' success in revealing the true God and his saving truth.

It is noteworthy that John 3:32 does not say that Jesus “bore witness” but that he “bears witness.” This is present tense, not past. Jesus did not come into the world, speak the truth and then leave it to merely human agencies to present it to the world. Instead, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he speaks even now through God's living Word. James Montgomery Boice writes,

Where do we hear his testimony? The answer is: in the Bible. Is the Bible something that is dead, irrelevant, or dated, then? Not for John! And not for any who have come to know Christ and to have experienced the living power of the Bible to speak on his behalf. The Bible is living. Christ is living. Moreover, it is through the Bible that he continues to speak and bear his witness to heavenly things in our days.⁴

A CERTIFIED REVEALER

Not only is Jesus an able and willing revealer, he is also *certified* to reveal God's truth. When you go to a doctor's office, you look on the wall to see a proper medical school diploma. When a policeman shows up at your door, you ask to see his proper identification. How much more important is a proper certification for one who claims to bring saving truth from heaven and from God!

Jesus bears two credentials. The first is his full possession of God's Spirit: “He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:267-268.

the Spirit without measure” (Jn. 3:34). This contrasts Jesus with even the prophets, to whom God gave the Spirit only as their ministry required. But Jesus had every endowment of the Spirit. Isaiah foretold: “The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (Isa. 11:2). Jesus began his ministry in Galilee by reading from the scroll of Isaiah 61, starting with the words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Lk. 4:18). God did not provide his Son the Spirit in part, but “without measure.”

This full endowment of God’s Spirit is reflected in the perfect accord between Jesus and the Father. He always knew and did the will of the Father perfectly. He was never at a loss for God’s Word. Moreover, through the Spirit, Jesus performed great miracles that certified his teaching. These Spirit-wrought miracles are a remarkable credential that prove his divine authority. On one occasion, Jesus was teaching in a crowded house when four men dug a hole in the roof to let down a friend who was paralyzed. Jesus told the man that his sins were forgiven because of his faith. The Pharisees complained: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Lk. 5:21). Jesus replied, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the man who was paralyzed – ‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home’” (Lk. 5:21-24). When the man picked up his mat and walked out, Jesus’ authority was proved.

Ultimately, God’s Spirit certified Jesus by raising him from the dead. Paul says he “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:4). One who has led a sinless life and performed miracles of divine power, was publicly executed and buried in a sealed grave for three days, and who then comes to life before numerous witnesses has the right to claim authority to speak for God. In all these ways, the Holy Spirit marks Jesus as the true revealer from God.

Jesus’ second credential is his commission from the Father: “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (Jn. 3:35). John the Baptist heard the voice of God speaking from heaven after he had baptized Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I

am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). As such, God gave “all things into his hand.” This means that Jesus has the authority to declare God’s Word and to send the Spirit into the hearts of his own so that they receive it in faith. God had told John the Baptist, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” John therefore testified, “I have seen and have born witness that this is the Son of God” (Jn. 1:33-34).

This answers yet another objection to faith in Christ. You might say, “I should only believe something this important on proper authority and with certifiable proof.” But Jesus has that authority and it is certified by his full possession of God’s Spirit and by his commission from the Father. If you are looking for a spiritual authority, there is none like Jesus: he possesses the fullness of God’s Spirit as the provision of his loving Father. From the lips of any other spiritual leader, such a claim would be preposterous. But Jesus makes that very claim in the New Testament, and his record completely backs it up.

THE GREAT QUESTION

John 3 is one of the great chapters in the Bible because it answers the greatest question: What has God planned for the salvation of the world? Jesus teaches of our need to be born again, of God’s gift of his only Son to die for our sins, and of eternal life for all who believe. But that answer leads to another question that now is the most important of all for every individual: What do you make of Jesus Christ? Do you respond to him in trusting faith or in hardened unbelief? According to the final verse in this great chapter, the answer determines nothing less than your eternal destiny: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).

According to John the Baptist, there are only two options. The first is to receive in faith this Savior who reveals truth from heaven. Having sent his Son to reveal God’s way of salvation and to open that way by shedding his own blood in our place, God requires us to believe on him. Notice the present tense of this verse, which says that as soon as we believe we “have” eternal life. J. C. Ryle explains: “Pardon, peace, and a complete title to heaven, are an immediate possession.

They are a believer's own, from the very moment he puts faith in Christ."⁵

The other option is to reject Jesus. John says, "Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life." Notice that to reject God's Word about Jesus is to "not obey" – to commit treason against heaven. God has made faith in Jesus the one way to enter heaven; to deny him faith is to forfeit the life he offers. Moreover, it is to leave your sins unforgiven, so that God's holy wrath remains on you. Jesus said, "Unless you believe that I am he you will die in you sins" (Jn. 8:24).

People become angry at the mention of God's wrath. But a God without wrath would be a moral monstrosity; a God who is not furious against evil is not a worthy God – and there is no greater evil than to reject God's holy Son. Christians are sometimes scolded for teaching that people will go to hell simply for holding different views than we do. But that is not what we teach. Unbelievers will suffer the pains of hell not for rejecting our truth but God's truth, which he sent into this world through his Son, the revealer from heaven, whom the world once murdered on a cross and whom it crucifies today in prideful unbelief. It is to call us to faith that John warns us: "Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (Jn. 3:36).

If there is one thing for us to take away from our studies in John 3, surely it is that we must treasure God's Son, Jesus Christ, and the gospel he has revealed. J. C. Ryle sums up our response to Jesus in words that cannot be improved upon: "We can never make too much of Christ... We can never have too high thoughts about Christ, can never love Him too much, trust Him too implicitly, lay too much weight upon Him, and speak too highly in His praise. He is worthy of all the honour that we can give Him. He will be all in heaven. Let us see to it, that He is all in our hearts on earth."⁶

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), I:174.

⁶ *Ibid.*