

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this Bible study series you may learn how to build up the Christian Church. Two teachers will do Bible study together from John 3:1-36. We will use “the five steps” method of Bible study. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. You may join our Bible study every week by preparing for the next Bible study. You may also gather a few people around you and use this method of studying the Bible together. Doing Bible study together with a few other Christians is one of the best ways to grow to maturity as a Christian.

(S)      **STEP 1. READ**

Let us read John 3:1-36 together. When you are two or more people, take turns to read one verse each until you have completed the reading. Due to shortage of time, please read John 3:1-36 for yourself.

(T)      **STEP 2. DISCOVER**

Let us discover and discuss some important truths in John 3:1-36. “Which truth in this passage is important for you?” or “Which truth in this passage touches your mind or heart?” Think and write your answer in your notebook. After a few minutes take turns to share your discoveries with one another.

(S)      An important truth for me is in John 3:16 about salvation through faith. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

One. God so greatly loved.

The tense of the verb (aorist) points to one act of God. God’s love is the one, great, central fact and reality in the Bible! It shows that God’s love reached back to eternity, was expressed throughout history, and bears fruit in the present in our lives. The love, with which he chose us before the creation of the world, finds its highest possible expression in the incarnation and death of Christ, and is now shown in our salvation when we believe.

Two. God so greatly loved the world.

The word *the world* has several different meanings in the Bible and in the Gospel of John. Here in John 3:16, it refers to the world of lost people, without distinction with respect to race or nationality. It refers to people alienated from the life of God, laden with sin, exposed to judgement and in need of salvation, from every tribe, nation and language on earth. However, *the world* is here not viewed as the realm of evil, which is openly hostile to God, to Christ and to Christians, as in John 15:18. God does not love evil and therefore God does not love the world that hates God, Christ and Christians. God loves the world of lost people, without distinction with respect to race or nationality.

Three. God’s love gave his most precious gift.

God gave “his only-begotten Son”. This is an expression of who Jesus Christ is within the Trinity. It expresses the fact that from all eternity Christ is God, but within human history he took on the human nature to reveal God to people. God “gave” his Son means that God the Father gave God the Son to die as a sacrifice that makes atonement for the sins of believers.

Four. Only believers obtain eternal life.

Jesus is speaking of all those people who “receive him with *abiding* trust and confidence”. The verb *to believe* is in the present continuous tense and shows that it does not refer to those who once made a gesture of faith, but later backslid and stopped to believe. The faith of such people was only *an intellectual faith* or *an emotional faith*, but certainly not *a saving faith*. True faith continues to have a relationship of faith with Jesus Christ every day and will persevere to the end. Although the Gospel is preached to people of every tribe, nation and language in the world, not everyone who hears the gospel believes in Jesus Christ. But whoever believes, whether he is a Jew or a Gentile, receives eternal life the moment he believes.

Five. True believers receive eternal life.

*Eternal life* is to personally know and fellowship with Christ (Jn 17:3) from the moment you believe. It is a new life that includes assurance of salvation, fellowship with God, peace, joy and love for God in the heart, and purpose and fulfilment in this life! It is not only a life that is different in quality from the life that characterises this present age, but it also is a never-ending life! It is the assurance that you will definitely share in the wonderful life in the new heaven and new earth in the future age of glory after the second coming of Christ.

(T) An important truth for me is in John 3:17-21 about God's judgement for unbelief.

One. The Jews believed that only they are exclusively God's chosen nation.

They believed that the Messiah would not condemn Israel, but only the Gentile nations for oppressing Israel. However, the prophet Amos warned the Jews that God would also judge the Jews (Am 3:14)!

Two. Jesus teaches that God's salvation plan includes all the nations of the world.

He says, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him". Like John 3:16, *the world* here means the world of lost people in every race, nation and language. God's plan was to not only save people from the punishment of sin, but also to save people from the power of sin and from sin itself and give them everlasting life.

Three. Jesus teaches that the issue of salvation or condemnation is determined in this present life.

While the main purpose of Christ's first coming was to bring salvation, it does not mean that the main purpose of his second coming will be to bring condemnation. John 3:18 says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe *stands condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son". Nobody will have to wait for the Day of Judgement to receive his judgement. The decision itself whether you will be saved or condemned is made *now* in this present life. John 5:24 promises that on the Day of Judgement all people who believe in Jesus Christ will not be condemned. Because they have already been forgiven and justified, no sentence of condemnation will be read against them! However, John 5:28-29 warns that on the Day of Judgement all the people who have done evil will rise to be condemned. Then their condemnation will be publicly announced! All people who have rejected Christ by not believing in him do not need to wait for the final judgement day to hear God's verdict. They stand condemned already. John 3:36 says, that God's displeasure and settled indignation rests on all who disobey Christ by refusing to accept him with a genuine and abiding faith. After death there will be no second chance to believe in Jesus Christ! The issue of salvation and condemnation is determined in this present life!

### (S) STEP 3. QUESTION

Let us try to understand all the truths in John 3:1-36 and ask our questions about the things we still do not understand. "Which question about anything in this passage would you like to ask to the group?" Think and write your question in your notebook. Then discuss the questions and try to find answers.

**1<sup>st</sup> Question.** (3:3,5,7). What does it mean "to be born again"?

(T) The real thing Nicodemus wanted to know was, "what good thing must I do in order to enter the kingdom of God?" His unspoken question was, "How do I get eternal life?" Jesus answered him with a riddle. "A riddle" is a saying with a hidden meaning. He said, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again".

One. To be born again means to be born from above, from God's Spirit.

The word *born again* literally means *to be born from above*, that is, from God who lives in heaven (Jn 3:31). It also means *to be born anew*, that is, *to be born all over again* spiritually after you have been born physically (cf. Gal 4:9). In John 3:6, Jesus says "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit". To be born of the flesh means to be born physically with a sinful human nature. To be born of the Spirit means to be born spiritually with a new spiritual nature.

Two. To be baptised with water is a sign and seal of being baptised with the Holy Spirit.

In John 3:5, Jesus says, "No man can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of *water and the Spirit*". In Matthew 3:11 we also read about *water and the Spirit*. John the Baptist says, "I baptise you with water ... but Jesus Christ will baptise you with the Holy Spirit". The meaning is that people are only born again by the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives. According to 1 Peter 1:23, the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the Word of God to regenerate people. The baptism with water does not regenerate people! The baptism with water is *the sign* or pictorial presentation, and *the seal* or confirmation what the baptism with the Holy Spirit has done! Only when the sign is accompanied by the thing signified, then it is valuable. Because in verse 6 and 8 we no longer read of the birth of water, but only of the birth of the Spirit, it proves that the one great essential need is to be born of the Holy Spirit!

Three. To be born again by the Holy Spirit is an absolute necessity and a sovereign work of God.

In John 3:7-8, Jesus says, "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Like all the Jews, Nicodemus believed that people could save themselves by perfectly obeying the law of the Old Testament and a host of man-made regulations. Now Jesus surprised him by teaching him that salvation is *a gift* from God and *not a work* earned by man. Jesus teaches him that in order to be saved, a person must be born again by the Holy Spirit and not by the works of law.

In the beginning stage, salvation is a sovereign act of God and man is completely passive. Nobody on earth can direct the wind. It acts with complete independence. Likewise, nobody on earth can direct or control his own salvation. The Holy Spirit of God acts with complete sovereign independence from man. Regeneration is a sovereign work of God over which man has no more control than he has over the wind. Nicodemus should have known from the Old Testament that he is corrupt and absolutely unable to save himself. He should not have been so surprised at the teaching of Jesus. After rebirth, Christians work out their salvation, that is, have the responsibility to let God save them more and more from sinful habits (Phil 2:12-13).

**2<sup>nd</sup> Question.** (3:3,5). What is “the kingdom of God”?

(S) One. The kingdom of God is the realm in which the rule (lordship) of God is recognised and obeyed and in which the grace of God prevails. Mark 10:24-27 says that the kingdom of God expresses itself in *the complete salvation* of believers. Luke 17:20-21 says that the kingdom of God expresses itself in *the rule of God in the hearts and lives* of believers. Matthew 13:37-43 and 16:18-20 say that the kingdom of God expresses itself in *the constitution and growth of believers as a Church* on earth. Hebrews 12:22-28 and 2 Peter 3:10-13 say that the kingdom of God will finally express itself in *the new heaven and the new earth*.

Two. Entering the kingdom of God is the same as receiving eternal life or being saved. Thus, a comparison between John 3:3-8 and John 3:16-17 teaches that the sovereign act of God precedes any act of man, that is, *being born again* precedes *believing* in Jesus Christ. In its initial stage the process of changing a person into a child of God precedes conversion and faith. This is also the teaching of John 1:12-13.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Question.** (3:9-13). What does Jesus mean when he speaks about knowing and testifying about the heavenly things?

(T) In John 3:11 Jesus says that John the Baptist and he himself knew and testified about “the heavenly things”. But the Pharisees and Nicodemus did not accept their testimony. Jesus could say this, because with his penetrating eyes he could look right into the heart of Nicodemus and see his hesitation to believe what Jesus was teaching.

One. The earthly things.

In John 3:12, Jesus says, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe”. He had been speaking about things, which are heavenly in character and in origin, but take place on earth, like “baptism” and “regeneration”. Although “regeneration” of people by the Holy Spirit, is clearly taught in the Old Testament in Ezekiel 36:25-27, the majority of Jews rejected it. God said, “I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” Regeneration takes place in the sphere of human experience on earth. Therefore anybody who knew the Old Testament and reflected on his own natural inability to please God would have understood the necessity of being born again! Other “earthly things”, are the coming of the Messiah to his own people, the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and the proclamation of the good news to the Gentiles everywhere in the world. But now that Nicodemus and people like him think that these earthly things are incredible, how would they ever believe when Jesus speaks to them about “the heavenly things”?

Two. The heavenly things.

The “heavenly things” is especially God’s eternal plan of salvation, which Jesus explains in John 3:13-18. Only the Son of God has always been in the presence of God and knows all the decisions that were made in heaven. Therefore, God’s plan to save *his people from every nation* in the world and how he would save his people through the cross lies completely outside the range of man’s knowledge until it is revealed to man. Only Jesus Christ descended from heaven to earth. Only he knows God’s eternal plan of salvation. Only he reveals it to man and fulfils it for man!

**4<sup>th</sup> Question.** (3:14-15). What does Jesus mean when he says that “he must be lifted up”?

(S) The heart of God’s plan of salvation was partially disclosed in the *types* of the Old Testament, but only fully disclosed when their *antitype*, Jesus Christ himself fulfilled them! In the Old Testament in Numbers chapter 21, *the type or illustration* of God’s plan of salvation was the lifting up of the bronze snake on a pole in the desert. *The antitype or fulfilment* of God’s plan of salvation would be the lifting up of the Son of God on the cross!

There is resemblance between the illustration in the Old Testament and the fulfilment in the New Testament. In both cases, death threatens as a punishment for sin. In both cases, God himself with sovereign grace provides a remedy. In both cases, something or somebody must be lifted up in public view of everybody. In both cases, only those who with a believing heart look at the thing or Person lifted up, are saved.

But as always, the fulfilment far transcends the illustration. In the Old Testament, the people faced physical death, but now everybody in the world faces spiritual, physical and eternal death because of their sin! In the Old Testament, the

snake that was lifted up had no power to heal. It was only a symbol. But Jesus Christ, has power to heal, power to save and power to destroy those who reject him!

The lifting up of Jesus Christ on the cross is presented as *a must*. Jesus says that “he must be lifted up”. His lifting up on the cross is not one of many remedies in the world, but it is *the only possible remedy* for sin in the world! Only by the death and resurrection of Jesus can the demands of God’s righteous and holy anger against sin as well as God’s love be met! The lifting up of Jesus Christ refers first of all to his lifting up on the cross, but is never isolated from his lifting up in resurrection, ascension and enthronement (Acts 2:33). Though Christ is lifted up in the sight of all, he does not save all.

(T)     **STEP 4. APPLY**

After brainstorming with one another and recording a list of *possible applications*, consider which possible application God wants you to turn into a *personal application*.

(S)     **STEP 5. PRAY**

Let us take turns to pray about one truth that God has taught us in John 1:1-18.

Dear Father in heaven, I thank you for your great love for me! Help me to never forget John 3:16. Help me to tell this good news to other people. I pray that people, who are listening, will open their heart and receive your love. I pray that they will receive Jesus Christ into their heart and life.

(T)     Dear Father in heaven, I have a desire to become more like John the Baptist. Please give me your grace that I may conduct my life and my ministry in such a way that Jesus Christ becomes greater and I myself become less. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

(S)     **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Prepare next week’s Bible study. Use “the five steps” method to prepare John 4:1-54.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and build Christ’s Church” and Internet on [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net).

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to “Discipleship training on the air”.