

From the Other Side **John 3:22-36**

Have you noticed people seem to want lots of information about what's on the other side of *the great divide*? Not the mountains just east of Bathurst, but what's on the other side of death. People seem rather intrigued by what may await them, and they're very interested in anyone – well, almost anyone – who can tell them something about it.

Over the past couple of decades, quite a number of people have had what have come to be known as near-death experiences. These people have come very close to death – some have even been pronounced clinically dead – and then they've revived. And apparently some of them had rather interesting experiences during that period when they were dead or nearly dead. And they write books about it. Many people buy their books – because they have great curiosity about what happens the other side of death. You can even find books on the topic in Koorong – supposedly written from a Christian perspective. I must confess I haven't actually read any of the books – either the Christian ones or the non-Christian ones. The point is: they sell well because people are so vitally interested in that subject. They touch on something unusual that people want to know about.

Others use other means to try to find out about what happens the other side of the grave. A few years ago, *Time Magazine* had a snippet about a week-long New Age Psychic and Spiritual Healing Cruise in the Caribbean. As the ship, the *Norwegian Sky* (sounds like a name for a plane rather than a ship), hopped from island

to island, a team of clairvoyants and channelers were on hand to help passengers speak to the dearly departed and to assist them with past-life regressions. It's a reminder that so many people out there are interested in what's on the other side – and will pay lots of good money to try to find out about it. They have a curiosity, perhaps even a fear. They want to know. They've got great interest. For some, they want to prepare for what happens after death.

But for all their searching, many ignore the best source of information about what's on the other side. They ignore Jesus. In the climax of this passage this morning, John reminds us that Jesus actually comes from the other side. Jesus tells us about what He's seen and heard. He tells us about the realities of what life on the other side's about. We don't need to turn to other more dubious sources, because we have a far better source in Jesus. Indeed, the Bible greatly discourages us and forbids us from using these other partial and inadequate and false sources.

John's Further Preparation for Jesus

Last week, we looked at the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus in the first half of chapter 3. Nicodemus leaves the scene, probably still scratching his head about what it means to be born again. The scene shifts to the Judean countryside. The apostle John again draws our attention to John the Baptist – and his relationship with Jesus. Verse 22:

After this, Jesus and His disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where He spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised. (This was before John was put in prison). An

argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that Man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the One you testified about – well, He is baptising, and everyone is going to Him."

So, we've got these two groups of people out at the Jordan River baptising:

- John the Baptist and his disciples; and
- Jesus and His disciples – although we're told in 4:2 that Jesus Himself wasn't actually baptising anyone, just His disciples.

John the Baptist's disciples get into an argument with one of the Jews – something about ceremonial washings. We aren't given any details about this argument. We can make some educated guesses.

- It may have been an argument about where John's baptism fitted in with other ceremonial washings carried out by various Jewish groups.
- It may have been about whether John's baptism was better than those other ceremonial washings.

But we don't really know – and it doesn't really matter for the point John makes.

What does matter is this provided the occasion for John the Baptist's disciples to ask questions about Jesus. It seems John's disciples were jealous for him. They come to him and say: Everyone's going to Jesus.

Now, clearly they exaggerate. The apostle John just told us in verse 23 that people were still constantly going to John the Baptist to be baptised. So, not everyone's going

to Jesus and His disciples. But there were enough going to Jesus to cause concern for these disciples. They were worried that John the Baptist may not be in the baptising business much longer. They were worried the bottom was falling out of their market.

Notice John's reply. Verse 27:

To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

He begins with a statement of general principle:

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.

That's God's sovereignty. It's self-evident really – but it doesn't stop us forgetting it.

- Did you determine whether you were born in India or Australia?
- Did you determine whether you were born in Brisbane or Bathurst?
- Did you determine whether you had rich parents or poor parents?
- Did you determine whether or not you had any sisters or brothers?
- Did you determine whether you had great musical ability or great mathematical ability?
- Did you determine your genes – not the ones you're wearing, but the ones inside you?
- Did John determine whether he was a prophet?

These things come from God. It's his prerogative – His sovereign will – as to what gifts and abilities He gives to which person. It's all outside human control.

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.

However, John the Baptist not only said the words, he also lived them. Outwardly, John had a fairly impressive ministry. He didn't have a marble palace or a yacht to sail round the Sea of Galilee, but he did have lots of people coming out to hear his message. His prophetic ministry made a significant impact. People knew who he was.

But now his ministry's declining and he didn't quite have his early retirement plan firmly in place. Yes, many still come to him, but now there's a new kid on the block. There's a bit of competition in the baptism market, and more people are going to the opposition. What's he to do about this alarming situation?

Nothing, except encourage people to go to Jesus. John had a settled conviction about his place in God's scheme of things. He knew his ministry was to prepare the way for someone else. He knew he wasn't the main event – he was the supporting artist getting the crowd ready for the real star. John knew that. He acted upon it. He didn't aspire to upstage the real star. He's quite satisfied with his place in God's plans.

He uses a picture of the best-man and the bridegroom to illustrate. We may get all sentimental about movies about a bride and a best-man falling in love and leaving the groom standing at the altar, but it's really a very wicked betrayal of trust. Such a betrayal was unthinkable

in the ancient Jewish world. The best-man's job was to serve the bridegroom. It'd be extremely unseemly and improper for the best-man to upstage the bridegroom in any way at all. That's how John the Baptist pictures his relationship to Jesus. He's there to prepare for Jesus' coming; to serve Jesus as a best-man.

That's the place God gave John the Baptist – and he's content with what God gave him. He doesn't rant and rave at God because God hadn't recognised his intrinsic importance and given him a better job. He didn't complain that he wasn't chosen to be the Messiah.

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.

He not only knew the words, they'd also penetrated his thinking and his self-perception. He lived by them.

I'm very tempted to pause at this point to think about how this applies to us today. People today are often very discontent with what they receive from heaven – even Christians.

- Some are discontent with the bodies God's given them.
- Some with the physical and intellectual capabilities God's given them.
- Some are discontent with the spiritual gifts God's given them.
- Some are discontent with their general situation in life – how much money they have; where they live.

They often express such discontent by comparing themselves with others – people to whom God's given more.

However, I leave you to ponder that further yourself. I encourage you to do so. There's great benefit in learning

the lesson of John's contentment. But it isn't the main point the apostle John makes here. The overall thrust of this passage is to focus on Jesus – on His greatness; on who He is; on the importance of believing in Him. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. He pointed others to the Coming One, namely Jesus. His primary concern is that we pay attention to Jesus. Jesus is the One who's really important. He'd be devastated if we focused on his humility – as good as that is – and missed Jesus.

The One from Above

And so, verse 31:

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The One who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what He has seen and heard, but no one accepts His testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the One whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in His hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

People disagree over whose words these are. When the apostle John wrote, he didn't use quotation marks. It's obvious John the Baptist speaks the words in verse 30 – but what about the words that follow?

- Is it still John the Baptist speaking?
- Or is this now comments from the apostle John?

I think it's the apostle helping us understand what's important here – and some of the other translations also take that option. The NIV thinks it's still John the Baptist

– the people doing this translation think John the Baptist continues to speak till the end of the chapter. In the long run, it doesn't matter much. This is now God's word. God's helping us understand what's important.

Three main things to note:

- First, Jesus is the One who comes from above, that is, He comes from heaven.
- Secondly, because He comes from above, it's very important to listen to His words, to His testimony.
- Thirdly, what you do with Jesus determines if you're in God's good books or God's bad books.

John reminds us that Jesus is *the One who comes from above* – comes from heaven. He comes from God's dwelling place. It goes back to what John told us in chapter 1 – Jesus is the Word become flesh. Who's the Word? According to John 1:

- The Word was already in existence with God before the beginning of time.
- The Word was actually involved in creation in such a way that He created all things.
- The Word was the source of all life.
- The Word was and is God.

Christians claim there's only one God – but this God reveals Himself in three persons: Father, Son and Spirit. This is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. John claims the Word's the eternal second person of the Trinity. And John tells us the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus. Jesus is God become man.

In verse 31, John contrasts Jesus with the rest of humanity. You and I and every other person who's lived are *from the earth and belong to the earth and speak as one*

from the earth. Our existence is very much tied up with this earth.

- We aren't eternally pre-existing spirits that are put into a body at our birth.
- We aren't part of God that's somehow trapped in a physical body at our birth.
- We aren't angelic beings that are being punished by being relegated to a human existence for a time.
- We aren't some piece of spirit that wanders in and out of a series of bodies through being reincarnated again and again.

We're human beings who began our existence at the time of our conception, and whose whole existence to date has been tied very much to this earth. We don't have some pre-existing knowledge or experience of God and heaven. Our knowledge of God and heaven is limited to what we discover during our time on earth.

But Jesus isn't like that. He's the One from above. He's the Word become flesh. He has far more knowledge and experience about God and heaven than we do. When He talks about the subjects of God and heaven, He knows what He's talking about.

- He testifies to what He's seen and heard (32)
- He's sent by God. (34)
- He speaks the words of God. (34)
- He fully has the Spirit of God. (34)

Thus, we should pay attention to Him.

Suppose you had a complex maths problem – and you wanted some help with it. Suppose you had a choice of two people to help you with that problem:

- Aiden Smith, a three-year old boy who thinks the paper in his father's maths books is good to draw

on, or

- Fred Smith, his father who lectures in mathematics at Sydney University.

Who are you going to choose? It's fairly obvious, isn't it?

Suppose you want to know about God and heaven. You have some difficulties that you can't work out. Suppose you have the choice of two people to help you:

- Fred Smith, the distinguished professor of mathematics at Sydney University, or
- Jesus, the One who's actually come from heaven – who's spent eternity living with God, and is Himself God.

Who are you going to choose? Once again, the choice should be fairly obvious, shouldn't it? But if the choice is so obvious, why do so many think the university professor knows more?

Let me take the illustration one step further. Same problem: you've got some difficulties about God and heaven you can't work out by yourself. Same two people to choose between – but this time let's give Fred Smith a near-death experience. So now your choice is:

- Fred Smith, the professor of mathematics at Sydney University who last year, after having a serious car accident, had a near-death experience where he believes he saw the entry to heaven, or
- Jesus, the One who's actually come from heaven – who's spent eternity living with God, and is Himself God.

It doesn't really change the equation at all. Jesus is just such an expert on God and heaven that it doesn't matter who you put up against Him. No one comes close to His expertise.

When it's put like that, it just seems so obvious, doesn't it? Indeed, it's so obvious we wonder why everyone can't see it. Why do people want to pay more attention to these near-death experiences? Why don't they pay just as much attention to Jesus? Why doesn't everyone accept who Jesus is and what Jesus says?

John mentioned one of the reasons in verses we looked at last Sunday. Verses 19 and 20:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

Some people refuse to accept Jesus' words and testimony, not because of some intellectual hang-up, but because of a moral hang-up. It's not that Jesus' words don't make sense. It's not that they don't understand what Jesus says. It's not even that they don't think what Jesus says is true. It's simply they don't want to give up their evil. They're addicted to their wrong thoughts, wrong speech and wrong actions. They don't want to be told those things are wrong. They want to keep those things, rather than give them up and acknowledge the truth about what Jesus says.

It's a little bit like the stories you hear of some criminals. Some of them become so used to living in gaol, they're actually afraid of living on the outside. They can't cope with it. And so, as soon as they're released from prison, they immediately commit some crime to get put back in gaol. They no longer want to live on the outside – even though they know it's the right thing to do.

John draws together the implications in verse 36 – and it's basically the same as last week. If this is who Jesus is, then it's vitally important you pay careful attention to Him. Jesus is God's final message to humanity – for Jesus is God Himself communicating with humanity. You can either take Him or leave Him. The choice is yours – but it's very important that you actually make the choice. For verse 36 highlights that the choice you make about Jesus determines your eternal relationship with God.

- Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. That is, those who accept what Jesus says will live forever with God. They'll enjoy the magnificence of heaven forever. They'll enjoy the pleasures of God's presence forever.
- On the other hand, those who reject Jesus won't only miss out on that, they'll also be subject to God's judgment – God's wrath or God's anger. If you turn away from the truth of Jesus and what He says, then you'll be turned away from heaven.

It's that serious. God says your relationship with Him depends on whether or not you believe His Son, Jesus.

Some people will chase after anything else so they don't have to believe in Jesus and what Jesus says.

- Some make up their own gods and their own religions and their own ceremonies.
- Some try all sorts of ways to make contact with their dead relatives so they can find out what's on the other side.
- Some put plenty of vigour into following up people with near-death experiences so they can formulate their own understanding of what's on the other side.

The Bible tells us that's not the way to go about it. Jesus is the expert. He's the One who came from the other side. You can't get better information about the other side than what He gives us. There's simply no point in going to these other people. For the purposes of living our life on earth and being ready for death and life after death, He's already told us all we need to know about the other side. The only issue that remains for us is: will we believe Him?