

John - Commentaries by Andrew Miller

Internal History of the Church (245 A.D. - 451 A.D.): Chapter 12, What Is the teaching of John 3:5? (3:5)

The expression "born of water," we believe, in no way means baptism. The new birth is the Savior's theme; without which no man can see or enter into the kingdom of God. It was not yet come visibly—"not with observation"—but it was there among them, as God's new sphere of power and blessing. Flesh cannot even perceive this kingdom. Christ had not come to teach and improve the flesh, as Nicodemus seemed to think; but that man might be partaker of a divine nature which is imparted by the Spirit. No mere external rite admits to the kingdom. There must be a new nature or life suited to the new order of things. "And Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Then the Lord shows Nicodemus the only way of entering into the kingdom. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Water is here used as the symbol of the cleansing and purifying power of the word of God; as in Peter, "seeing that ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit." Here, the truth is spoken of as the instrument, and the Spirit as the agent, in the new birth as he goes on to say, "Being born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God." Two things are necessary—the word and the Spirit. (1 Peter 1:22, 23.)

The passage obviously means the application of the word of God in the power of the Spirit—operating in the heart, conscience, thoughts, and actions; and thereby bringing in a new life from God, in which we have His mind, and His thoughts about the kingdom. The following passages will make it still plainer. "Of his own will begat He us with the word of truth." (James 1:18.) "That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." (Eph. 5:26.) "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." (John 15:3.) Here we have the moral cleansing or purifying of the soul, by the application of the word through the Spirit which judges all things, and which works in us new thoughts and affections, suitable to the presence and glory of God.

As a question of interpretation, then, we see no allusion to baptism in John 3:5: baptism may set forth that which is conveyed by it, but baptism itself conveys nothing. On the other hand—according to the inspired commentaries in the Epistles—baptism is the sign of death, not of giving life, as the Fathers uniformly affirm. "Know ye not," says the apostle, "that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death." (Rom. 6; Col. 2; 1 Peter 3) Besides it is perfectly plain that Nicodemus could not possibly have known anything of proper christian baptism, as it was not instituted by our Lord till after He arose from the dead.

Meditations on the Grace and Glory of the Blessed God, What is Believing in Christ? (3:33)

THIS is a vital question. All important. None more so. To believe in Christ is to be saved. To live and die in unbelief is to be lost forever. Yet, notwithstanding its unspeakable importance, there are few questions that come before the anxious inquirer, more undefined to his own mind than, "What is believing in Christ?" For such we write.

He thinks He has always believed in Christ; and has never doubted anything that the scriptures say about Him. And yet, he is sure that he is not saved by the belief which he has. Hence he gets occupied with faith itself, and soon comes to the conclusion that he has not the right sort. In this state of mind the young inquirer will be sure to attach a mysterious importance to faith, or believing, which does not belong to it. And in so far as this is the case, Christ Himself, the grand object of faith, will be lost sight of. This is one of the ways of Satan, to darken, confuse, and perplex the mind.

We have something like an explanation or definition of faith in John 3:33. "He that hath received his testimony bath set to his seal that God is true." The testimony, or word of God, is the ground of faith. When the sinner receives God's word as sure and certain truth, just because it is His word, he honors God with the confidence of His heart. "He sets to his seal that God is true." He has faith. He believes God. Repose fills the soul. He wants no higher authority. He now, as it were, countersigns the divine document, and the affairs of his soul are settled forever. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God: if the object be right, the faith cannot be wrong. Divine faith is faith in the divine testimony. Thus, a link is formed, through faith, between the soul and God, that shall endure forever; the word of God is His eternal bond.

Such must ever be the happy fruits of faith in God's word, whatever may be the character of the testimony believed. The standard of man's responsibility must depend on the nature of the revelation made to him. Noah, for example, believed one kind of testimony, and Abraham believed another. But whether it was about an approaching flood, or the promise to Abraham that his seed would be numerous as the stars of heaven, it mattered not as regards the result; both believed God, and both were justified. Through doubting God's goodness, and disbelieving God's word, the link of connection between the soul of man and God was broken in Eden; and now, through believing in God's goodness, and trusting in God's word, the soul is re-united to Him in Christ, to be separated no more forever. Who shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord? (Rom. 8) None! Heaven will not! Earth and hell cannot! Glory be to His name And there will be no beguiling serpent in the paradise of God, and no tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We shall only know good there; and fully, perfectly, and eternally enjoy it.

These few brief hints as to faith in general may be useful to some. We will now look at the particular question before us, namely, "What is believing in Christ?" Were we to give a direct answer to this question, we should say, To believe in Christ, is to look to Him, the Savior-God, as the one object of the heart's confidence and affection. He may be comparatively little known to the believer, and the expression of faith in Him may be very feeble, and sometimes assailed with doubts and fears; nevertheless he who has been taught of God to know Christ, once

dead and risen for him, as the one object of his faith, will cling confidingly and affectionately to Him, notwithstanding these things.

Comparatively little was known of Christ by either the woman that came to His feet, (Luke 7) or the man that was cured of his blindness. (John 9) (The great truth of His death and resurrection was not then fully revealed.) Yet one can easily see in them both, faith and affection. Neither the deep sense of guilt, nor the difficulties of the Pharisee's house, could hinder the woman from coming personally to Christ. And all the arguments and threatenings of the synagogue wholly failed to upset the confidence of him who aforetime had been blind; or to withdraw the affections of his heart from Him who had opened his eyes. The former knew more of the Person of Christ than of His work, the latter knew more of His work than of His Person. But with purpose of heart they did cleave unto the Lord, and He revealed Himself to both according to their need. No heart ever really desired to know the Person of the Lord to which He did not reveal Himself. And no soul ever really desired to know the work of the Lord, that will not stand in the full credit of that finished work, before the throne of God, forever. Every desire of the heart towards Christ is of the Holy Spirit, and in due time shall be fully satisfied. The soul that has got a glimpse of Christ will ever after desire to know more of Him. Nothing will ever satisfy it but Himself.

How often one has seen this exemplified in persons who were passing through deep distress about their souls' salvation. Nothing we could say gave them relief, or brought peace to the heart. The more touchingly we spoke of the love of Jesus, and of His grace to sinners, the deeper was their distress, because they could not see that He was theirs. But only suggest, If it would not be better and happier for them to give up Christ altogether, and think no more about those things which only make them unhappy. And, oh! in a moment you would see what a place the Lord had in their hearts. A chord was touched that caused the whole heart to vibrate for Him, and the tears to flow. " Oh, no!" they would exclaim, " I can never give up seeking after Him. If I perish, I will perish at His feet; still seeking to know His love and His great salvation." The heart never really desires Christ until the grace of God is at work there. The desire must come from Him.

The consideration of the four following things may be helpful to some of the Lord's precious, though weak ones. He would have them to be rejoicing in Himself, and peacefully resting on His finished work.

1. To believe in Christ is to believe in His love and grace, as revealed to us in the scriptures. But individual faith will surely say, His love to me a sinner. To begin with the love of Christ, is to begin at the right place. The believing heart will always make a personal application of Christ to itself. The love of Christ was manifested in coming down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save the lost. His whole mission and work express the greatness of His wondrous love. If I want to know the love of Christ to me, I must not look to myself, but to His manifested love for me a sinner His love brought Him down. True, His mission was the expression of God's love to the world. " For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16.) Hence, if I want to know the heart of God the Father, I must not look into my own, but to the gift of His Son. " Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10.) But the love of God, the love of Christ, and the love of the Holy Spirit, is all one and the same love. Only, in the work of redemption, God is represented as the fountain of love, Christ as the channel, and the Holy Spirit as the power that applies it to our hearts. Oh! wondrous, mysterious, marvelous love,-the love of God to sinners.

In so far as this divine love could be expressed or measured, Christ is the measure and expression of it; and individual faith, making a personal application of the Savior's love, rejoices in it, as if it all centered on itself. Just as Paul did when he said, " He loved me, and gave himself for me." Here the apostle speaks as personally, as if he had been the only one that Christ loved and died for. And surely this must ever be the language of faith. It never deals in mere generalities. It delights in the Savior's love specially to itself. Oh! troubled soul, think on this blessed truth! Let your mind dwell upon it, let your heart feed upon it. What more do you want? What more can you desire, than the love of Christ-this perfect love to you? Is there anything you need that is not to be found in His love? In all your meditations on the affairs of your soul, be sure that you make His love your starting-point, and lose sight of yourself in its heights and depths. It is the first note in our song of faith on earth, and the first in our morning song of joy in heaven. " Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen." Rev. 1:5, 6.

Some of the fairest choirs above,

Shall flock around my song,

With joy to hear the name they love

Sound from a mortal tongue.

His charms shall make my numbers flow,

And hold the falling floods,

While silence sits on every bough

And bends the listening woods.

I'll carve my passion on the bark,

Till every wounded tree

Shall drop and bear some mystic mark,

That Jesus died for me.

The swains shall wonder, as they read

Inscribed on all the grove,

That heaven itself came down and bled

To win a mortal's love.

2. To believe in Christ, is to believe that He died for sinners according to the scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-4.) But true faith in Christ is not satisfied with the mere general belief of this blessed truth. Taking the ground of a sinner, it says, " Yes, but Jesus died for me-He died for my sins, and through His death I am saved. He was delivered for my offenses, and where are they? They are all put away. He was raised for my justification. Hence, if He be a risen Christ, I am a justified sinner. The only proof, or evidence, that I have of pardon, justification, and peace in the presence of God is a risen Christ." Faith's question is not, how, or what I feel, but is Christ risen? If He who died for my offenses, be indeed risen from the dead, I am perfectly and forever justified before God. (Rom. 4; 5) No sinner can have settled peace, save on the ground of the death and resurrection of Christ. He who is seated at God's right hand above the heavens, is the living, eternal witness of the believer's full and everlasting salvation.

There are many other passages that plainly teach the same blessed, soul-saving, peace-giving truth; indeed, all scripture does. The Holy Spirit never suggests a doubt as to the believer's perfect security. All doubts and fears flow from the wicked insinuations of Satan. Such as " Yea, bath God said, ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? " (Gen. 3) This vile insinuation from the serpent suggested a doubt in the mind of Eve, which led to the whole mischief. The tempter tried the same thing with our blessed Lord in the wilderness, when he said, " If thou be the Son of God." But here he was met and vanquished by scripture. " It is written." Nothing but the shield of faith will quench the fiery darts of unbelief. Souls must watch against and ever treat all such evil suggestions as coming from the arch-deceiver. Doubts and fears are the prolific offspring of the wicked insinuations of the beguiling serpent. Faith's stronghold is the word of God, in which it securely rests. But should the enemy seek to invade its peaceful repose, it can triumphantly reply, " But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8.) The love of God to me while in my sins, as manifested in the death and resurrection of Christ, satisfies my soul, and settles all for me a sinner. God says it, I believe it, who may question it? Listen to God only. Such is the character of true faith. It is most personal. At the same time, while maintaining its individual place and communion, it rejoices in the common joy of all believers, and glories in the words, "we" and "us."

3. To believe in Christ is to believe in the cleansing power of His blood, according to the testimony of scripture, and for my own need as a guilty sinner. Although this truth is implied in what has been said about His death for us, still, it gives great relief to the conscience to have the plain direct word of scripture on this special point. Such as " The blood of Jesus Christ, his (God's) Son, cleanseth us from all sin." (1 John 1:7.) Faith takes its place amongst the "us," and knows for certain that all its sins are cleansed away. Hence the following strong language of unquestioning faith, " In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." (Eph. 1:7.) A personal application of the blood of Christ is peace to the conscience in the presence of God. Had the Israelite neglected to apply the blood of the lamb to the lintel and door posts of his own house in the land of Egypt, he would not have been safe. (Ex. 12) It was not enough that he had a lamb, or that he had killed it, and had the blood in the basin. No; it had to be applied to his own individual door, or the destroying angel would have entered and killed the firstborn. The blood alone on the lintel and door posts was the safeguard for all that were in the house. So is it now. Faith answers to the blood-sprinkled door-posts. There must be a personal application of the blood of Christ to our own souls to meet our own need. The mere general belief that Christ died for sinners, and that His blood cleanseth from sin, is not enough. There must be a definite, individual application of these blessed realities to our own souls. The language of faith is, " He loves me, He died for me, and His precious blood hath washed all my sins away." But though this is the language of simple faith, it is not, alas, the language of all who believe in Jesus. Many, of whose faith in Christ we can have no doubt, would be afraid to say so much. Through looking to themselves this fearfulness has great power over them, and keeps them from rejoicing in the Lord, and from enjoying His word. Faith never looks to self, but always to the Savior.

4. To believe in Christ is to believe that He receives all who come to Him-and, further, true faith in Christ will say, " He has received me." Sometimes the young believer who is not well established in the truth, will get into bondage on this point. He thinks that he sees and believes the truth about the love of Jesus to sinners, His dying for them, and the efficacy of His precious blood; but he looks to himself and sees many things that are contrary to Christ, and he begins to doubt if he has been or can be received. He will say plainly, " I doubt nothing you say about Christ, what I doubt is myself." This is a delusion. It is a snare of Satan. For how can you know by looking to yourself whether you can be received or not? You must allow Christ to say whether He will receive you or not, and believe what He says without questioning. " Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37) are His words of gracious assurance to the coming one. The believing heart is satisfied with this assurance, and finds rest in Jesus. Now its every need is met. All fullness dwells in Jesus. He has received me and fitted me for His presence. Thus faith rejoices in Christ Himself, and in all His wondrous love, His complete salvation, and His coming glory.

In conclusion, allow me to ask, in plain terms, is my reader a believer in Christ Jesus? Without faith in Christ there is no salvation. The soul that lives and dies in unbelief is lost forever. Oh! if thou art yet a stranger to Jesus, and living in unbelief, how awfully dangerous thy state is. Eternal danger is treading on thy heels. Another step and all may be over-and all may be lost forever. Oh! then, at once, as thou art, and without a moment's delay, flee to Jesus the Savior of sinners. Believe in His love-His love for thee a sinner. Believe in His death-His death for thee a sinner. Trust in His precious blood to wash all thy sins away. Rest assured that He is ready and waiting to receive thee. Oh! then, believe in Jesus-receive the truth into thy heart. Come to Himself. Trust in Him. Oh! with what joy and delight He welcomes home the poor lost sinner whom He loves, the one for whom He bled and died, the one whom He has besought many times by His gospel to return, the one whom the Father's hand of love has guided to His everlasting embrace, that He might " breathe on him," quicken his dead soul, fill and overflow it with life and love divine.

" Come unto me," are His own words, " all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And " whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." " I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ," says Paul, " for it is the power of God unto salvation to EVERY ONE THAT BELIEVETH." Matt. 11:28; Rev. 22:17; Rom. 1:16.