

# Chapter 3

## COMMENTARY

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The opening paragraph of chapter three (vs. 1-8), offers a conclusion to the section which began in 2:18. In this section (2:18-3:8) John informs us about the division that had occurred in the community of believers to which he is writing, and how there were those who had denied Yeshua and left the community. What is more, those who had left the community were actively engaged in trying to persuade others to do likewise, i.e., to deny Yeshua and leave the community. John makes it clear that those who were seeking to persuade others to follow them in their anti-Yeshua perspectives were deceivers and were actually exhibiting the very spirit of antichrist, the work of Satan which Yeshua Himself came to abolish.

Thus, in these opening verses of chapter three, John emphasizes the power of God's love for His chosen ones, a love which is transforming and which therefore displays itself in the very character of those who are the true children of God. Since the greatest expression of God's love is seen in the giving of His Son to procure the salvation of the elect, the character of those who are saved by His work is that of righteousness. Since Yeshua came "to destroy the works of the Devil" (3:8), those whom He saves from the destruction of sin are marked by their growing in righteousness, that is, they are becoming more and more like their Messiah and Savior, Yeshua.

**1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.**

John is continuing his thought from the previous verse, 2:29, in which he states that those who "practice righteousness" are "born [begotten] of Him," i.e., of Yeshua. To be "children of God" is therefore the greatest expression of God's love, for to be brought into His family is only possible through the payment for sin made by the self-giving death of His Son.

The parallel to the prologue of John's gospel is obvious:

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the

right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (Jn 1:11–13)

In some measure, John's theology of reconciliation can be seen in his emphasis upon God's love. If one searches the Apostolic Scriptures for the verb and its corresponding noun, i.e., ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη (*agapaō* and *agapē*), one finds that in John's Gospel and Epistles, these two words are used far more often than in the other books. Of the 259 total times the words are found in the entire Apostolic Scriptures, 102 of these are in John's Gospel and Epistles. Indeed, in 1John these two words are found a total of 46 times! No wonder John is referred to as the "Apostle of love." And it is the love of God demonstrated in Yeshua—His incarnation, His life, death, and resurrection; His ascension and intercession, and His promised return to bring all who are His to dwell with Him forever—this is the love of which John desires his readers and us to know, to appreciate, and in it to find everlasting rest, confidence, and joy.

John begins our verse with an imperative—a command, "to see" (ἴδετε, *idete* < ὁράω, *horaō*), that is, not only to acknowledge the reality of God's love, but also to experience it through affirming that what He has said is true, and by recognizing the abiding presence of the Ruach, the very Spirit of Messiah with all who are His.<sup>1</sup> Further, John does not simply implore us to "see [know and experience] the love of God" but he describes the love of God by adding the word ποταπός (*potapos*), generally translated as "See how great a love...." This word (*potapos*) is found only five other times in the Apostolic Scriptures (Matt 8:27; Mk 13:1; Lk 1:29; 7:39; 2Pet 3:11), and in each of these occurrences, the context shows that this word (usually translated "how great" or "what kind of") "always implies astonishment and generally, admiration."<sup>2</sup> We could paraphrase in a more colloquial English: "Wow! Look at the sort of love the Father has given to us!"

The emphasis is first expressed in the fact that God's love is genuine love, for it is "given" not earned: "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us...." Love that is earned is no love at all. It is not that God makes known His standards, then requires His creatures to

1 Note how easily Paul equates the "Spirit of God" with the "Spirit of Messiah" in Rom 8:9 – "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Messiah, he does not belong to Him."

2 Plummer, *1John*, p. 120.

conform to His standards in order to be loved by Him. Rather, as John teaches us in this epistle, it is the love of God for us that changes us by implanting within us the deep desire to please Him, a desire which flows from a heart of gratitude for what He has done for us in His Son. It is important to note that the Greek word translated “bestowed” is in the perfect tense (*δέδωκεν*, *dedōken* < *δίδωμι*, *didōmi*), which means that the act of God’s love occurred in the past and continues in the present and future. This is the same truth which Paul teaches us in his epistles:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Messiah Yeshua from all eternity, (2Tim 1:8–9)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Messiah, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Yeshua Messiah to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Eph 1:3–6)

...that we would be called children of God; – By this phrase, John sums up the greatness of God’s love to His elect, for it is because of His efficacious love that all who come to faith in Yeshua become members of His family. And would the Father ever dismiss His own children? Of course not! He has determined that by His love He would make us “holy and blameless before Him” (Eph 1:4). As Brooke notes regarding the phrase “called children of God”:

He therefore reminds them of their high privilege and position. God has given them proof of His love. He has bestowed on them the rank and title of His children, sharers in His nature. And it is no mere title. It corresponds to real facts, if they will but realize them, and respond to them. And these facts are the cause of the hostile attitude of the world.<sup>1</sup>

And as Paul notes regarding believers being children in God’s family, we become fellow heirs with Yeshua Himself.

1 Brooke, *1John* p. 79.

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Messiah, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom 8:15-17)

And that all who are chosen by Him will be glorified in the Messiah is clear as well:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30)

This is why Yeshua is not ashamed to identify with us as brothers and sisters.

For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.... (Heb 2:11)

It is interesting to consider *Pirke Avot* 3.22, a later addition to the Mishnah and its emphasis upon membership in Israel in order to be considered the "children of God." It seems very possible that such was written in response to the Apostolic Scriptures and the emphasis the Apostles put upon God's love for His Son, Yeshua, and for all who are "in Him."

Beloved are Israel that they are called children of God; greater love *was it that it was made known to them that they are called children of God*, as it is said, "You are the children of the LORD your God (Deut 14:1).<sup>1</sup>

...and such we are. – This phrase (*καὶ ἐσμὲν*) is not found in several of the later manuscripts,<sup>2</sup> and thus is missing in the KJV. But the phrase is

1 *Pirke Avot* 3.22 (in Charles Taylor, *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers* [KTAV, 1969], pp. 57-8. Other compilations list this as 3:14).

2 K L and most minuscules.

strongly supported in the earliest manuscripts,<sup>1</sup> and should therefore be received as the original reading.

In adding this phrase of affirmation, John intends to emphasize the reality of the believer's position within the family of God. It is not simply that believers are referred to by the title "children of God," but that they actually have been brought into the family of God through divine fiat.

John underscores the reality of our status when he writes that already, at present, we are children of God "And that is what we are!" In other words, God does not give us a promise which He will fulfill in the future. No, in fact we are already God's children. We enjoy all the rights and privileges our adoption entails, because we have come to know God as our Father.<sup>2</sup>

In one sense, all who are children of God are so through what humanly speaking we call "adoption," for there is only one, eternal, "natural" Son of God, and that, of course, is Yeshua. Yet on the other hand, all who become "children of God" do so through being "born again," that is, "born from above," as Yeshua makes clear in His conversation with Nicodemus.

Yeshua answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again (γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν) he cannot see the kingdom of God." (Jn 3:3)

The Greek γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν is best understood as "born from above," the very thing that Nicodemus failed to understand. Only through the omnipotent God is it possible for a fallen soul to come to repentance and to be given the desire and ability to lay hold of God's love and gift of salvation. And this brings us back to the primary focus of John in our text, namely, the all-powerful love of God which He has bestowed upon all who are His children. Further, that this love is expressed only through the salvific work of Yeshua ties the Father's love together with the work of His Son, and emphasizes the obvious fact that to deny Yeshua is likewise to be separated from the love of God which is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord (Rom 8:39).

*For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.* This final statement of our verse closely parallels the words of Yeshua found in Jn 16:2–3.

1  $\mathfrak{P}^{74\text{vid}}$  A B C 33 81 614 1739 *it*<sup>h</sup>, 65 *vg*.

2 Kistemaker, *1John*, p. 294.

They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. (Jn 16:2–3)

Throughout our verse John has identified himself together with his readers who are true believers in Yeshua, for he speaks of the love of God bestowed upon *us*, so that *we* are called children of God, and such *we* are. Likewise, in this final phrase John identifies himself with the believing community by stating that the world does not know *us*.

Here, once again, John makes a clear distinction between “the world” and the believer, as he did in 2:15–17,<sup>1</sup> for the “world” is that fallen, sinful order which opposes itself to God and His righteousness. Moreover, when John writes that the world does not know us because it does not know God, he is using the concept of “know” in the sense of mutual relationship with mutual goals and desires, that is, as describing a relationship that is, in some sense, based upon a mutual agreement of life’s very purpose.

For the believers in Yeshua, having come to know and experience the abundant love of God in Messiah, our life goal is to glorify Him and to enjoy the covenant relationship we have with Him through His word, by the Ruach, and in the fellowship of other believers. For those who have no relationship with God through His Messiah, Yeshua, life’s goals are (even if philanthropic) primarily self-centered, being “governed” by the shifting sands of culture in determining the ever changing boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not. Thus, someone who professes to be a child of God through faith in Yeshua but who seeks to be accepted by the world, shows themselves to be spurious in their faith. It is not that we seek to be persecuted or try to make ourselves unlikeable in order to prove the genuineness of our faith. But the reality will be that if as children of God we seek to honor Him by walking in His ways and living in accordance with His truths, then those who long to be accepted by the world will inevitably consider us as outsiders and as opposing the very lifestyle they desire.

Here we see an important “spiritual litmus test” for each of us to consider. To the extent that we seek to be accepted by the world of unbelievers, by participating with them in the ways of the world which are contrary to God’s ways, to that extent we diminish and even tarnish our witness, and may call into question the reality of our faith. This

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1 See the comments above on 2:15–17 for a fuller explanation of the use of the word “world” as opposing the righteousness which is to characterize the believer in Yeshua.

does not mean that we should seek to separate ourselves from unbelievers, for to do so would make it impossible to be a light for Yeshua to them. Rather, what I am emphasizing is the need to guard our hearts and though we live in the world, we must constantly affirm that we are not “of the world.”

**2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.**

As John makes clear in the previous verse, so here he reaffirms that believers in Yeshua are *now* constituted as children of God and this eternal status is not something we must wait for in the future. Yet as children of God by faith, we are in the on-going process of sanctification, that is, growing in maturity of our faith and becoming more and more conformed to our Lord, Yeshua. It is on this basis that John now continues to affirm that our success in becoming like Him is assured, for this is the very purpose of God for His children.

John addresses his readers here as “beloved” (*ἀγαπητοί, agapētoi*), by which he could mean “loved by God” or he could be using “beloved” as a term of endearment, stressing his own pastoral care and affection for this believing community. That he uses this same term to address his readers a number of times in this epistle<sup>1</sup> would opt for his using it as a term to express his own affection and care of his readers.

... *and it has not appeared as yet what we will be.* – John’s point is, in one sense, obvious: while we have the promise of immortality and eternity in the very presence of our Lord, an eternity that is entirely devoid of sin, sorrow, sickness, and death, along with everything that constitutes the brokenness of this world, we simply do not know what the days ahead hold for us as we await the coming of our Lord.

In the phrase “has not appeared as yet,” the Greek verb *φανερόω* (*phaneroō*) is translated “appeared.” This verb is found nine times in our epistle,<sup>2</sup> carrying contextual meanings such as “to be evident or manifest” (2:19), but it more often denotes something that, apart from divine revelation, cannot be fully known. This is surely the meaning in our current verse, including the use of the same verb in the next clause of our verse to describe the appearance of Yeshua as He returns in accordance with His promise.

While God has revealed the ultimate reality which consists of

1 Cf. 2:7; 3:21; 4:1, 7, 11.

2 1:2; 2:19, 28; 3:2, 5, 8; 4:9.

eternity with Him for all who are believers in Yeshua, the exact sequence of events that will eventuate in this reality are not so clearly laid out in Scripture. We are certain that Yeshua will return to this earth as He promised, but we do not know the exact timing, or when He will return. Thus, we await the unfolding of God's perfect plan, living in anticipation of Yeshua's coming, always seeking to be faithful and obedient as we wait.

As Kistemaker explains:

We are in principle children of God (v. 1) who lack perfection because of sin. But that which is principle now will become full reality in the future. John, therefore, observes, "What we will be has not yet been made known." That is, God has only begun His marvelous work in us which in time He will bring to completion.<sup>1</sup>

*We know that when He appears, we will be like Him because we will see Him just as He is.* – The Greek of the first phrase could be taken one of two ways. The subject of the aorist passive verb φανερθῆ (phanerthē from the verb φανερόω, phaneroō, "to appear, to become visible, to reveal") could be either the "it" of the phrase "it does not yet appear what we shall be," or the "Him" of the following phrases, "we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is." While commentators differ as to which option they consider most likely, the weight of evidence, both contextual as well as syntactical, surely favors Messiah as the subject, for the final phrases of the verse clearly point to Him.<sup>2</sup>

John has already referenced the return of Yeshua in 2:28, and here again he appeals to Yeshua's coming as that event which initiates the bringing of all things to God's appointed design. John makes it clear that even though we do not know all of the details, particularly the various events in our world that will lead up to the consummation of all things, we do have certainty about our final sanctification and our eternal dwelling in the very presence of our Savior. For we will be like Him in that we will be clothed with immortality, never again to be encumbered with the cloak of death which sin brought into the world.

This is affirmed by John's emphatic statement that "we know..." (οἶδαμεν, oidamen). Our sharing in Yeshua's immortality is not something left up to a future revelation, but is already affirmed because God has

1 Kistemaker, *1John*, p. 295.

2 For a fuller description of why "Messiah" is the subject of the passive verb φανερθῆ, see Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook of the Greek Text* (Baylor Press, 2004), p. 69.



revealed it to us through His word.

For example, in the prophet Jeremiah, ADONAI speaks of His “eternal love” for His chosen ones:

ADONAI appeared to me from afar, saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love (וְאֶהְבֶּתְךָ עוֹלָם אֶהְבֶּתִּיךָ); Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness. (Jer 31:3)

That which is described as “eternal love” has neither beginning nor end. Therefore, this confirms that those who are His children will inherit eternal life.

Thus Paul writes in his epistle to the Romans:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; (Rom 8:29)

And in Colossians we read:

When Messiah, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. (Col 3:4)

Likewise, in his grand teaching on the resurrection in 1Cor 15, Paul teaches us regarding what will take place at the return of Yeshua.

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. (1Cor 15:50–53).

John speaks to this same reality in Revelation when he describes the eternal city of God:

There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. (Rev 22:3–4)

That His name is written on their foreheads means that they belong to Him. This is the same symbolism that attaches to the *teffilin* (טוֹטְפוֹת, cf. Deut 6:8; 11:18) which are to be bound “as a sign on your

hand and they shall be for frontals [ornaments] between your eyes." The wrapping of *teffilin* is to be a constant reminder that we belong to God through the work of His Son, Yeshua.

*...because we will see Him just as He is.* – Here, in the Apocalypse, John gives us further understanding of what he writes in our epistle. For when He states "they will see His face," we are given further elucidation on what he means by the phrase in our verse, "because we will see Him just as He is." Following the fall of mankind into sin through the disobedience of Adam and Chavah, we hear the response of Adonai to Moses' request to see His glory: "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" (Ex 33:20). How then should we understand John's words in Rev 22:4, that those who dwell in the eternal city will "see His face." This means that even as Adam and Chavah enjoyed unrestricted fellowship with God before their fall into sin, so those who are given eternal life with God will have that same, unimpeded fellowship with the Almighty.

Surely we know God in truth through the revelation He has given us: through the creation, through the inspired word, and most perfectly, in His Son, Yeshua. There is nothing amiss with the self-revelation God has given. The weakness comes from our own inability to fully comprehend what He has revealed of Himself, and to accept and affirm it without any semblance of doubt or lack of complete, unwavering faith. Now, while still possessing the sinful nature, we struggle against the flesh and against the sinful nature which wars against the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:17) and would seek to persuade us to doubt what we know by faith to be true.

But when Yeshua returns, our mortality will be transformed and we will be eternally free of death because we will be free of sin and thus of the sin nature. By God's omnipotent power and mercy, through the work of Yeshua on our behalf in His death, resurrection, and intercession, we will regain an even greater position than that which Adam and Chavah had before the fall. For while Adam and Chavah were created with the ability to sin and thus to be separated from the very God Who created them, such will never be possible for those who possess eternal life and who are therefore eternally the "children of God." When mortal puts on immortality, we will never again be separated from God, for sin in its entirety will be done away with, for "the last enemy that will be abolished is death" (1Cor 15:26), and death is the fruit of sin in our fallen world.

This is what John means when he writes that "we will see Him just as He is." We will know Him by having complete and uninterrupted fellowship with Him, a fellowship entirely devoid of any fear, doubt,

or human weakness, because the sin nature or the “flesh” (as Paul describes it) will be entirely eradicated.

**3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.**

In the opening phrase of this verse, the NASB adds the word “fixed” in order to properly represent the Greek, which in a word-for-word translation has: “and each one who has this hope upon Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” But the construction of the Greek phrase τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην ἐπ’ αὐτῷ gives emphasis upon the word “hope” by adding the demonstrative “this” (ταύτην), and thus not describing “hope” in a general sense of human desire, but of something that is sure and already known. Indeed, in the previous verse John states that as believers in Yeshua we know that He will return. It is therefore not some wishful thinking, or desire for which we cannot be certain. By faith we know that Yeshua is coming again. Thus, the hope of which John speaks in our text is the firm assurance and certainty of Yeshua’s coming, a sure and certain hope which we possess by faith in Him. Thus, the NASB’s “fixed on Him” is a worthy translation of what the Greek represents.

This hope is not something the believer manufactures or must somehow cause to exist in his or her mind. Rather, our hope is Messiah Himself.

Of this I was made a servant according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Messiah in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:25-27)

The hope every true believer possess is vested in the very person and work of Yeshua, made know to us through the Ruach, and laid hold of through the gift of faith granted to us by God’s grace (Eph 2:8-10).

...*purifies himself, just as He is pure.* – In these words, John does not convey a wish, as though he were saying “may he purify himself,” nor a possibility, “he may purify himself,” nor a command, “he ought to purify himself.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, John states this as a reality for everyone who is born from above by the Ruach and who is therefore a child of God

1 Kistemaker, *1John*, p. 296.

through faith in Yeshua and the saving work He has accomplished. That is, the life of every believer is one that continues to grow in conformity to Yeshua Himself, being more and more known by purity of life in contrast to impurities of the world. Since He is our hope, we strive to walk as He walked, to put into our daily lives and activities the righteousness we know to be His. As Calvin writes:

The meaning then is, that though we have not Christ now present before our eyes, yet if we hope in him, it cannot be but that this hope will excite and stimulate us to follow purity, for it leads us straight to Christ, whom we know to be a perfect pattern of purity.<sup>1</sup>

This striving to be pure as He is pure connects with John's previous exhortation about Yeshua's coming in 2:28. For when we abide in Him, we may look with confidence to His return and not shrink back in shame at His appearing.

**4 Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.**

It is important to note in this verse, as we have noted before,<sup>2</sup> that John often speaks of the dominant character of one's life as indicative of whether one is truly born again or not. The NASB has added the word "practices" in the opening phrase of our verse, i.e., "Everyone who practices sin..." and rightly so. For Greek utilizes a present participle which, in this context, surely denotes "characteristic action." John is fully aware that believers do sin, for he has exhorted us to confess our sin and thereby to be cleansed from such unrighteousness (1:9, cf. also 2:1) and be restored to fellowship with God and with fellow believers (1:7). But in this verse as well as in the previous chapters (cf. 1:6; 2:3-4, 11), John makes it clear that if the dominant character of one's life is that of living in disobedience to God and to His Torah, then such a person is self-deceived if he or she continues to maintain that they are truly "children of God."

But to make such a clear and bold statement as John does in our verse, may well prompt an obvious question: "What constitutes sin?" "How is sin to be defined?" Quite clearly, as far as human culture and society is concerned, "sin" is "defined" on a sliding scale. What one culture considers "sin," another culture accepts as the norm. And even

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *1John*, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> See the comments above on 2:17.