

1 John 3 – Part L

1 John 3:9

1Jn 3:9 **Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.**

Without any question or debate, this verse is the most controversial verse in the entire letter of [1 John](#). It has always spawned the controversy related to sinless perfection in a believer's life. In fact there are certain denominations that actually believe that sinless perfection can be achieved in this life. I assure you that that is incorrect. The misunderstanding that surrounds this verse is really quite phenomenal. The problem exists simply because our tendency is to interpret words based on what those words mean to us. However, from a very biblical perspective, that approach can only lead to very disastrous results. The Bible must be translated and interpreted based on what the words meant to the audience to which they were being spoken. We consistently call that the historical/grammatical approach. On top of that, the key words, verbs, and phrases must be translated properly. It is this last area that has ultimately caused the controversy surrounding this verse. Someone reads the verse and they do not understand that the verb for “**does not sin**” and the verb for “**cannot sin**” are both in the present tense indicating continuous action. We have studied this over and over and over and fully understand that the actual meaning of those words refer explicitly to continual sin, habitual sin, persistent sin, practicing sin, and ongoing sin in a person's life. Because they are in the present tense they do not and cannot refer to an isolated act of sin, but rather to the settled habit of sin.¹ So in essence, John is simply reiterating in this verse everything that he has taught us up to this point.

The NIV translates the verse as follows,

1Jn 3:9 **No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.**

The AMP translates the verse as follows,

1Jn 3:9 **No one born (begotten) of God [deliberately, knowingly, and habitually] practices sin, for God's nature abides in him [His principle of life, the divine sperm, remains permanently within him]; and he cannot practice sinning because he is born (begotten) of God.**

The ESV says,

1Jn 3:9 **No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.**

Now the issue that John has been addressing should by this time in our study be perfectly clear. He is saying that the genuine evidence of someone being righteous before God is that they are consistently doing what is right. Today we might say that you cannot get what is right by always doing what is wrong, and we would clearly understand that. V9 is very clear – the person who has truly been “**born of God**” will not continue in sin. The phrase “**born of God**” is a perfect participle in the Greek language. What that means is that the new birth is not just something that happened in the past, but it is something that continually retains the effects of that new birth. It has a permanent effect on the believer's life.

However when it comes to the Bible, it seems that people are not willing to accept God's assessment and teaching on who is saved and who is not saved. John has clearly taught that the individual who consistently, persistently, continually, and as a habit and practice of their life live in outright sin, disobedience, and rebellion to God's word simply is not saved. Now honestly, and without insulting anyone's spiritual intelligence, that should be more than obvious to someone who claims to be a believer. Unfortunately, what the current Christian culture and mindset has created is a spiritual environment that places cultural compassion above biblical truth. Certainly none of us should lack compassion, but be more than willing to exercise compassion and mercy all the time. However, doing so should never be at the expense of compromising the truth. It seems that the church at large is willing to say that anyone is saved as long as they outwardly and verbally confess Christ. The problem is that nothing could be further from the truth, and that is exactly what John is addressing in this letter. He has been relentless, unyielding, and uncompromising in communicating one simple fact – that anyone who continues to live in sin as a way of life is not saved. The simple truth of the matter is that when God makes someone His child, that person will not go on sinning in their life. If for whatever reason they do, it simply is an indication that they have never been saved. Unfortunately, a statement like that seems so difficult for the Christian church to embrace because we think that we know that one individual who is the exception to this truth. We become emotionally and socially attached to people and therefore our discernment is often very clouded. So rather than being able to actually help the individual, our unwillingness to accept God's Word in this area actually most likely becomes a hindrance to that person being saved. What an absolute tragedy! If living in sin and living without regard to the Word of God is the prevailing pattern of a person's life, then that person has never been saved. That is what John has been communicating over and over for 2 ½ chapters. If we have missed that point, and if we have found a way to simply ignore what John has been saying, then we have erred in our thinking and have completely mishandled God's Word.

Please notice once again that John begins this verse with the word “**whoever**”. Dr. Daniel Akin, who is the President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, says this about the word “**whoever**”. *“The apostle expresses a universal declaration that allows no exceptions to the rule... John's point is clear: there is not a single regenerated person who lives a life of habitual sin.”*² This one simple word embraces and includes everyone who fits into this category, and it provides no exceptions. He has used that word in v4, 6, and 9. He has encouraged us in v7 to “**not be deceived**” in our understanding. He was very explicit in v8 that the person who continues to live in sin is simply “**of the devil**”. When we get to v10, John will say that the person who “**does not practice righteousness**” simply is not of God. I have no idea how any of this could be any more straightforward and easier to understand. We simply have to let the words say what they say. John is not intimating that a believer is completely free from personal sin in their life – not at all. What he is saying, however, is that the believer's life is not characterized by sin and does not behave in a manner that is consistent with the character in nature of sin.³ Why is that? It is because the believer has been given a new nature. It is a nature that is divine in its origin and in its effect on the believer. The person who was once lost and dead in their sins and trespasses is now alive and the very life of God is now their life.

Now, probably the most important word in the verse is the word “**seed**”. What that word is going to teach us is really a very simple truth. The word “**seed**” teaches us that when someone has truly been

“**born of God**”, that that spiritual reality changes everything about their life – everything. If you are not careful, you will begin to find exceptions and develop excuses for individuals who do continue to practice sin as a way of life. You could do them no greater harm than to mishandle the truths that John has presented in this letter so far. Expressing the idea of the “**seed**” in another way, how a person lives is simply a reflection of whether or not they belong to God or they belong to Satan (v8-9). John is not debating the issue that a Christian has sin in their life and does fail in their Christian life. In fact, [1 John 1](#) clearly dealt with that issue and provided a clear response as to what that believer should do. What John is dealing with is the person who claims to be a Christian, but they continually live in sin and disobedience to the word of God and are not willing to repent of that sin. John is clearly talking about the prevailing characteristic of a person’s life and not isolated instances of sin that are common to every Christian.

Now the first phrase that is important to understand in v9 is the phrase “**born of God**”, and then he adds the commentary that God’s “**seed remains**” in the person who has truly been saved. So it is important to identify what it means to be “**born of God**”. In my personal understanding, the issue and definition of biblical salvation is the most misunderstood doctrine in the church. We have so many differing and varying definitions of salvation that it is mind boggling to say the least. The issue of being “**born of God**” is the most important question that anyone ever has to answer. Jesus said the following to Nicodemus in [John 3:3](#),

Jn 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

A person can disregard that statement, ignore it, and simply refuse to believe it, but in the end every person will stand before God and give an account of what they did with Jesus Christ. There will absolutely be no exceptions to this. If a person has not entrusted their life to the Lord Jesus Christ, they will die in their sins and will be tormented in the Lake of Fire with the devil and all of his angels and every lost person since Adam. It will be a place like no other – indescribable and unbelievable. There is no way for anyone to quantify the absolute horror of spending eternity without Christ.

Now it is important to understand what God says is the supernatural result of someone who has truly been “**born of God**”. [2 Corinthians 5:17](#) says the following,

2Co 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

Either we believe that verse, or we do not believe that verse. Paul simply uses the word “**anyone**” to bring our attention to the seriousness of his continuing message. The word “**anyone**” means exactly what it says. If any individual is “**in Christ**”, then for that individual everything has “**become new**”. In other words, everything in their life has undergone a spiritual change. What is it about these words that we do not understand? What is it about these words that we are not willing to both believe and accept? This is exactly where the church goes astray. God gives us clear words that have a simple meaning, and we are not willing to embrace those words, but are always finding reasons why they are not applicable in someone’s life. Either we believe God’s Word or we do not believe it. For the person who has truly been saved, the way they think has changed, the way they live has changed, and the way they talk has changed. Unfortunately, the church is filled with people who profess these

things outwardly, but there is absolutely no evidence of any kind of meaningful change ever having taken place in their life. If that is the case then they simply are not **“in Christ”**. You cannot read that verse any other way.

The phrase **“born of God”** is in the perfect tense and the passive voice. That is critical to a proper understanding of the phrase. The passive voice means that the subject, or in this case the person who is **“born of God”** has been acted upon by someone else. It simply means that God is the one who has birthed them into His family. God is the One who has made them a part of His family. The perfect tense means that something was completed in the past at a specific point in time, and the result of that action is continuing in the present. Now that is very important to understand. It simply means that the effect of being **“born of God”** is something that continues in the life of the believer. It means that old things have passed away, and all things, **“everything”** has become new and are continuing to be so in the believer’s life. The perfect tense speaks of something that was completed in the past and has produced an eternal effect on the individual. This is something that God and the Holy Spirit alone produce in the new believer’s life. Everything in the person’s life changes both drastically and dramatically. There are no exceptions, but our tendency is to want to make exceptions. Apart from the new birth, it is impossible for someone to live the Christian life. Sin will always have the last word in their life, and sin will completely dominate and control their behavior.

The person who has been **“born of God”** has been given God’s divine **“seed”**, and that **“seed”** is God’s supernatural life living and operating within the individual. It is something that is permanent and it is what makes the individual spiritually alive.⁴ As a believer you are spiritually alive because God has implanted his supernatural life into your life. You are not and cannot be a Christian without this happening to you. It must happen to you, and God is the only one who is able to cause it to happen in your life. So, we know certain things about a **“seed”**. First of all, we know that a seed only produces after its kind. In other words, an acorn seed does not produce an apple tree or a tomato plant. Seeds only produce after their kind. So, God’s **“seed”** only produces that which is godly in a person’s life. [Matthew 7:18](#) says,

Mt 7:18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Secondly, we know when we plant a seed and it does not come up, that where there is no growth that there is no life. When I plant my garden there are some seeds that do not produce. In my mind they have no life in them, so I simply plant other seeds in their place. If there is no spiritual growth, then there is no spiritual life. In John’s terminology, the individual simply has not been **“born of God”**.

So, what is John clearly explaining here? The simple word **“because”** is a word that indicates what the writer is about to do is to give an explanation of what he has just said. He has just said that a true believer cannot continually and habitually live in sin and in an ungodly manner, and the reason is **“because”** God has placed His divine and supernatural life into that believer. This is something that God and God alone has done, has performed, and has guaranteed to take place in every one who is **“born of God”**. There are no exceptions. This does not happen because of some kind of inherent and natural ability that a person has. It does not happen because they deserve for it to happen to them. It does not happen because God has seen something unique and special about them. It happens because God divinely appointed His supernatural life to be implanted and birthed into everyone who has been

saved. Once again, there are no exceptions. All of this can be summed up in the word “**grace**”. Grace is when God gives a person two things. He gives them the desire to do His will and then He gives them the power to do His will. A person will never have the desire to do God’s will or the power to do God’s will until the grace of God has saved them and changed their life. Once again, there are no exceptions – none. The “**seed**” of God is God’s divine spiritual life working in the believer and it is the guarantee that the person who has been truly “**born of God**” will not continue to live in sin as an ongoing and persistent habit of their life. Will they fail? Yes. Will they sin? Yes. Will they continue to live in sin as a way of life? No. If they do, then the life of God and the seed of God has not been given to them. God’s “**seed**” is a divine, supernatural work that is the permanent possession in the life of a genuine believer. [1 Peter 1:23](#) says the following,

1Pe 1:23 **having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever,**

The word “**incorruptible**” means that God’s seed in the believer does not spiritually decay or break down, but is permanently “**incorruptible**”.⁵ In other words, the work of God in a believer’s life cannot fail to accomplish what it is designed to accomplish. God’s work in a believer is an attribute of his deity that cannot fail.⁶ If God’s work in a believer’s life failed, then it would mean that God is a failure – which we know cannot happen. It is a word that carries the sense of that which constantly endures in a person’s life.⁷

So what John is clearly stating in v9 is that “**because**” a believer has been permanently and supernaturally “**born of God**” and has God’s “**seed**” abiding in them, that individual “**does not**” and “**cannot**” live in habitual sin. This is a tremendous truth. What John is telling us is that God is so deeply and powerfully at work in a believer’s life that that believer cannot continue to practice sin in their life. I am not sure that we actually embrace these truths. The new birth is a profound, extreme, and deep transformation that always takes place in the individual’s life, and it is constantly compelling the believer to live a holy life.⁸ It must be appreciated that even when a believer stumbles and fails in their life, that the divine life of God that has been implanted in them at the new birth will prevail over their sin. It should be a deep concern for each one of us when we see and hear of professing believers who continue to habitually live in sin without any remorse or repentance. John affirms without any fear of contradiction that that is a very false premise of genuine salvation. He has been affirming this over and over and over again. When someone is born again, the inevitable impact of that becomes readily visible in their life. It is what it means to be a “**new creation**” in Christ.⁹ It would be foolish and unbiblical to think that someone who is a “**new creation**” in Christ will continue to live like a lost person outside of Christ. To think that would be to deny the reality of salvation and what it supernaturally produces in a person’s life. [John 1:13](#) describes exactly what has happened in the life of everyone who has truly been “**born of God**”.

Jn 1:13 **who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.**

You have been born through the will of God and not through your own will, effort, or works, but solely through the sovereignty and work of God in your life.

Notice the word “**remains**” or “**abides**” in v9. It is the much used Greek word “*meno*”. This is a very common New Testament word and it means to remain in the same place and the same position over an extended period of time. It describes something that remains where it is and continues in that same state. And just to emphasize its permanence in the believer’s life, John uses the word “**remains**” or “**abides**” in the present tense which simply means that it continues to remain and abide in the believer’s life.¹⁰ In other words, it is always operating in you and for you. There is never a time when the work of God in your life will be thwarted, stopped, or removed. That is what the present tense is communicating. Right now, this very moment, God is deeply working in every believer’s life to accomplish in them the supernatural work of conforming them into the image of Jesus Christ. Whatever struggles you may be having and whatever fears may materialize in your life, please be assured that God is deeply at work in your life and is more than able to help you to be an overcomer in those things that seem to hinder you. This is utterly glorious and magnificent. We thank God that “**His seed**” remains in us.

ENDNOTES

¹ Stott, 130.

² Akin, 148.

³ Akin, 148.

⁴ Wuest, 149.

⁵ Strong, 1001-1002.

⁶ Zodhiates, 298-299.

⁷ Harris, *aphthartos*, electronic page.

⁸ Stott, 131.

⁹ Precept, 1 John 3:9, electronic page.

¹⁰ Precept, 1 John 3:9, electronic page.

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