

**“God So Loved the World...”**

**(The Gospel of John, Part 8)**

John 3.1-16

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We have come to one of the most important passages in the Bible; indeed, to the most well-known verse, John 3:16. The context is a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus, probably in Jerusalem, following Jesus’ cleansing of the temple early in his ministry in the gospel of John.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of that scrupulous, devout, faithful, law-abiding group of Jews that emerged during the period between the Old Testament and the New. The Pharisees were *the* most religious group in mainstream Judaism. Nicodemus himself was a man of influence and prestige: John calls him “a Jewish leader,” literally, “a Jewish ruler.” He was trusted and respected and wise. If there was *anybody* who ought to know the deep mysteries of God, it was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus “at night.” Nicodemus, literally and figuratively, is *in the dark*. He says to Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” It’s not a question, it’s an affirmation. *Three* affirmations, in fact. Nicodemus calls Jesus “Rabbi,” “Teacher,” recognizing Jesus’ wisdom and authority. He knows that Jesus has “come from God.” And he recognizes that “God is with” Jesus in some kind of special way. He doesn’t yet understand that Jesus is Messiah, Son of Man, Savior, and Lord, but he does (correctly) understand *some* things about Jesus. It’s not a bad place to start.

I wonder: do the other Pharisees, the other Jewish leaders and rulers, know that Nicodemus is approaching Jesus? Did they send him? Or is Nicodemus doing this on his own initiative? Is that why he comes at night – because he doesn’t want to be seen? John doesn’t tell us; those details don’t matter. What matters is the *conversation* with Jesus – for only Jesus can lead Nicodemus out of the dark.

Nicodemus approaches Jesus with that introductory set of affirmations. Perhaps he’s hoping Jesus will offer some greater explanation of who he really is. But Jesus leads the conversation in a different way: “I assure you,” – which is literally, “Truly, truly,” or even more literally, “Amen, amen!” – “unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.” “Born anew,” says Jesus. Some translations say, “born again.” The Greek word *anōthen* can be translated “anew,” or “again,” or “a second time,” or even “from above.” So in this verse, the King James and the NIV and NLT say “born again,” and the RSV and CEB say “born anew,” while the NRSV and the Message say “born from above,”

and *all are equally accurate and faithful translations of this enigmatic word*. Jesus is saying that the only way to see God's kingdom is to be *born again* or *born anew* or *born from above* – and, truthfully, *all those phrases refer to the same phenomenon*: there has to be a *spiritual rebirth* in a person's life. It doesn't matter if you're Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Nazarene, or Pentecostal, we're *all saying the same thing*, using different words. *A second birth is necessary* if you want to see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus clarifies: "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom." So *spiritual rebirth* has to do with both *water* and *the Holy Spirit*: the water of baptism, and the Holy Spirit of God.

But Nicodemus, for all his wisdom and learning, knows *nothing* about the Holy Spirit. He's living his religion *by the book*, not by the Spirit. The book is important – for Nicodemus, the sacred scrolls of the Jewish Law; for us, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments – for the book tells us *about* God, *about* Jesus, *about* the Holy Spirit – but the book and the Spirit are *not* the same thing. It's not the *book* that blows into a person's life that leads that person to a saving faith in Jesus Christ – it's the *Holy Spirit*, working in that person's heart, as she or he *reads* the book and realizes the enormous import for their own life. Nicodemus could read his scriptures dozens of times over, but unless he's willing to let his *heart* and his *soul* be *impacted* by none other than the *Holy Spirit of God*, all he has is a dead religion, not a living faith. This is news to him. "How are these things possible?" It's the last thing he says in this conversation. He is dumbfounded. All his wisdom and learning is *good* ... but it's not *sufficient*.

So Jesus offers the truth of the gospel, his first real *sermon* in John's gospel. It begins in verse 10. And it ends ... where? There were no quotation marks in Greek. Does it end at verse 21, as in some translations? Or does it end at verse 15, as in others? When we get to that famous verse 16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life," who says that – is it *John*, or is it *Jesus*? Or ... does it even matter, so long as it's *true*?

But we're not quite to verse 16 yet. Let's pause at verse 13: "No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man." It's a reminder that Jesus both *came down from heaven* (remember John 1?) and that he will *go up to heaven* – and that he's the *only* being who has *ever* done that. Brunner puts it this way: "Jesus is the exclusive *personal* bridge between heaven and earth, between God and human beings.... Do we want clear knowledge of God in heaven? Listen to this Jesus...; he is the One – the only One, in fact – who has been up there. Do we want to go to God? Follow Jesus – he is the only one who has been there and who knows the way back there.... The space between God and human beings is filled by one person exclusively: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man and the One-and-Only Son of God, the sole Mediator between God and human beings."

Next we need to pause at verses 14 and 15: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life." Way back in Numbers 21, the Israelites rebelled against God, God sent poisonous snakes to discipline them, the Israelites confessed their sin, and God instructed Moses to put a snake up on a pole, so that if anyone had been bitten by one of the poisonous snakes, they could look up at the snake on the pole and

be healed. So “just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness” in a way that could bring salvation to the people of Israel, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up” in a way that could bring salvation to *everyone*, “so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.” The affirmation that “the Son of Man must be lifted up” is a clear reference to Jesus being nailed to the cross, when he won for us our redemption from sin. It may also be a reference to his ascension, when he returned to his heavenly glory after his resurrection. Notice that the offer is for *everyone*. “*Everyone* who believes in him will have eternal life.” Nothing else matters – not race, not gender, not language, not country of origin – *nothing* matters, except belief in Jesus Christ. That’s the one thing – the *only* thing – that truly matters.

That leads to the crux of the matter: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.” It does not say, “God so loved *Christians*,” or “God so loved *Americans*,” or “God so loved *church-goers*,” or any other exclusive nonsense. No, the offer is for *the whole world*, and everyone in it. God so loved *the world* (literally, the *cosmos*!) that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. In the wideness of God’s mercy, there are no boundary lines *anywhere*. Faith in Christ is what matters, and it’s the *only* thing that matters. Brunner lays out the depth and breadth of this magnificent verse something like this: “God (the greatest subject ever) so (the greatest extent ever) loved (the greatest affection ever) the world (the greatest object ever) that He gave His One-and-Only Son (the greatest gift ever), so that every single individual (the greatest opportunity ever), who is [simply] entrusting oneself to him (the greatest commitment ever) would never be destroyed (the greatest rescue ever), but would even now have a deep, lasting Life (the greatest promise ever).”

That’s the goal. That’s what God is offering to all of us, to the entire cosmos. Eternal life. What is it? It’s not *unending existence here on this earth*. Nor is it something that only begins in heaven, when we die. No, what John is describing in his gospel, what Jesus is offering to all of us, is something that can begin *right here, right now*. John defines it, later on: “This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent.” (John 17.3) Eternal life begins the *moment* one “believes in him,” places their faith in Jesus Christ, entrusts *their* life to *His* life. That’s the moment of rebirth, being born from above, born anew, born again. In that moment of belief, faith, and trust, we come into the inheritance that God has prepared for us: a priceless treasure, the greatest wisdom of all, greater than anything Nicodemus had ever learned in all his studies, the wisdom and the peace that come from knowing, truly *knowing*, God, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom God sent. It’s not so much about giving intellectual assent to a series of doctrines so much as it is a decision to *trust*, to surrender, to hand our lives over to him. Letting ourselves decrease so that he may increase. Letting go of our ego, our pride, our self-justification, our sin, and simply saying, “Here you go, Jesus. I’m yours. I can’t make good decisions on my own, and I need you to guide me. I can’t correct the mistakes I’ve made in the past, and I need you to wash me. I don’t know all that I thought I knew, and I need you to teach me. I can’t heal myself from the wounds I or others have inflicted on me, and I need your saving grace.” It is just simply – and I do sincerely mean *simply* – placing our trust in him. Our *wholehearted* trust in him. He can do what no teaching, no *book* can ever do. He can give you *life*. He *wants* to give you life. True life. *Real* life. Deep and lasting life. Life ... *eternal*. And he can do it for you right here ... right now.

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