

John 3:1-17
That the World Might be Saved

Main idea: Jesus didn't come to condemn, but to save.

A man from the back mountains of Tennessee found himself one day in a large city, and for the first time in his life, stood outside what looked like a small closet behind metal doors. It was an elevator. He had never seen one before, and he didn't know what it did, so he was amazed by it as he watched it. Because he saw an old, frail woman hobble into the elevator, and after the doors closed, a few minutes later the doors opened and a young, attractive woman walked out.

So the father hollered to his youngest son, "Billy, go get your mother."

When you come to church, or live out in the world, or even just wake up in the morning, do you want to be transformed, or do you just want the people around you to be transformed?

In other words, is the message of the gospel just for other people, like all the people out there who haven't believed it yet, or is it for us? When you hear a sermon, do you think, "Wow, I'm glad I'm here to hear this," or do you think, "Man, I hope my wife is listening to this!"

And when you go about your day, and you get frustrated with our political situation, or with your family, or with your neighbor, are your thoughts mostly about how other people in this world need to change, or about how you need to change?

Leo Tolstoy once said:

"Everybody thinks of changing Humanity and Nobody thinks of changing Himself." - Leo Tolstoy

Now, there are certainly a lot of things that need to change in this world. This world is broken with sin,¹ corruption,² and sickness.³ So I'm not saying that the world doesn't need to be transformed, but I'm simply pointing out that becoming a Christian is a personal transformation.⁴ It fundamentally changes who you are.⁵ Jesus changes your purpose in life.⁶ He changes your outlook.⁷ He changes your thoughts,⁸ your actions,⁹ and your passions.¹⁰ When you become a Christian, the Bible says that you're a new creation. The old has gone, and the new has come.¹¹ That's a total life transformation.

So listen closely. If you're not in some way blown away by what it means to be a Christian for you personally, you might not yet really be one.¹²

¹ Romans 3:23, 5:12

² Galatians 6:8, 2 Peter 2:19

³ Matthew 17:14-18

⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁵ 2 Corinthians 6:14

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:23, 1 Peter 2:9

⁷ Philippians 2:5-7

⁸ Philippians 4:8

⁹ Ephesians 2:10

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 6:5, Psalm 84:2

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹² Matthew 7:21

I've been very careful over the years how I say that kind of thing. Many preachers seem to constantly try to get Christians to doubt that they're Christians. But if you've received Jesus as your Savior, I don't want you to doubt that.¹³ So when I say that Christians ought to have transformed lives by the power of the gospel, I say it not to condemn you, but that you might really rest in what Jesus has done for you, and begin to rejoice that God has saved you through Him by His grace.¹⁴

To talk about this morning, we're going to look at John 3. Please turn there with me. John 3:1-17. Please stand with me for the reading of God's word.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:1-17)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

You may be seated.

Our passage this morning includes the most famous verse in all of the Bible: John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." We could spend all our time this morning unpacking that verse, but I'm sure most of you have heard that sermon before many times. So today, in order to better understand John 3:16, we're going to look at the verses that lead up to it, and the verse that immediately follows it.

Verse 1 introduces a man named Nicodemus, and it describes him as a Pharisee. To be a Pharisee meant that Nicodemus devoted himself to the strictest of obedience to God.¹⁵ And while we often criticize the Pharisees

¹³ Acts 16:31

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:8-10

¹⁵ Otherwise, Matthew 5:20 would be essentially meaningless.

for their legalistic hypocrisy,¹⁶ it appears that there were exceptions,¹⁷ and that Nicodemus himself was genuine in his devotion to God.¹⁸

It also describes Nicodemus as a ruler of the Jews. To be a ruler of the Jews meant that Nicodemus was on the highest Jewish court, kind of like the supreme court of the Jews.¹⁹ This means that all of the Jews saw Nicodemus as one of the most righteous, wise, and respected people on the face of the earth.

Verse 2.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” (John 3:2)

At the very beginning of their conversation, Nicodemus admitted to Jesus that he believed that Jesus came from God.

In the Gospels, we read that some people began their conversations with Jesus with flattery. For example, the man in the Bible known as the rich young ruler came to Jesus and called Him a “good teacher,” and Jesus responded, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”²⁰ The rich young ruler didn’t really believe that Jesus was good, but just wanted to flatter Jesus before talking with Him.

But from everything that the text tells us about Nicodemus, I don’t think he was trying to flatter Jesus. He believed that Jesus came from God. He certainly didn’t understand yet what all that meant, but he believed it. And that’s important to remember because as they began to talk, and Nicodemus asked Jesus questions, we might think that Nicodemus was trying to catch Jesus in something he might say, like so many other Pharisees did.²¹ But to the contrary, Nicodemus was genuinely completely blown away by how Jesus described those who enter the kingdom of God.

Here’s the first thing Jesus told him. Verse 3.

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:3-4)

Nicodemus was shocked. He was hearing about this for the first time, and it sounded unbelievable. So Jesus elaborated. Verse 5.

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you

¹⁶ For good reason: Matthew 23

¹⁷ Such as Gamaliel, who stood up for Peter and the apostles, saying that it’s at least possible that they were on the right side of things. Acts 5:33-39

¹⁸ Nicodemus later defended Jesus (John 7:46–53) and helped to bury Him (John 19:38–42)

¹⁹ Interestingly the Sanhedrin was the council that sentenced Jesus to death (Mark 15:1). But it can be assumed that, along with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus did not consent with their decision (Luke 23:50–51, John 19:38–39).

²⁰ Luke 18:18–19

²¹ Mark 12:13

hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” (John 3:5-9)

I’m amazed at how much we still can’t predict the weather. Weather services today do a pretty good job, and there’s even a prediction every 15 minutes of when they think it will rain or snow. And it’s often right! But so often, it’s still wrong. With all our fancy equipment and sophisticated knowledge, in the end, we still have to say that the wind blows wherever it wishes.

In the same way, we ought to be led by the Spirit of God.²² We ought to be transformed.²³ And we won’t always know where God is leading us,²⁴ so we simply need to trust Him and be born not according to this world, and our logic, but be born again.

Nicodemus was blown away. He couldn’t believe it. “How can these things be?” Once again, I don’t think Nicodemus was really questioning if Jesus was right, but he just couldn’t fathom what Jesus meant. It was completely foreign to how Nicodemus always believed and lived.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus thought that his relationship with God depended on his obedience to God.²⁵ On how righteous he could live before God.²⁶ And even though we know that’s impossible because we’re sinners incapable of perfectly obeying God by our works,²⁷ Nicodemus thought at least if he tried really hard, he could please God. But then he hears Jesus say that it’s actually completely out of your hands. Because you must do the impossible. You must be born again.

Now, we’re used to that kind of terminology in the church, but think about how crazy that must have sounded to Nicodemus. Nicodemus grew up believing in a system of animal sacrifices.²⁸ He believed in the Temple.²⁹ He believed in what he could do. So it’s no wonder that Nicodemus responded, “How can these things be?”

When you sit down and really study the Bible, and take it for what it actually says, not filtering it through all our doctrines and traditions that we often do, but just read it and think about the words that are actually printed on the page, you find that so often, you’ll say to yourself, “How can these things be?” Because the Bible’s message is much more raw, and romantic, and devastating, and good than we usually allow ourselves to believe.³⁰

I mean, the Bible says that God became a man.³¹ I mean, how is that even possible? And yet, because God is God, He can do anything, even what we consider to be impossible.³² And because God is love, God would do

²² Romans 8:14

²³ Romans 12:1-2

²⁴ Proverbs 3:5-6

²⁵ Deuteronomy 11:26-28

²⁶ This is the mentality that Paul spoke against in Romans 3:20

²⁷ Psalm 14:1-3

²⁸ Leviticus 16:15

²⁹ Psalm 84:1-2. While we think of this Psalm as referring to heaven, Jews would have thought of it as referring to the Temple.

³⁰ There are countless examples we could point to. Consider, for instance, when Uzzah died because he touched the ark of the covenant, attempting to protect it from falling (2 Samuel 6:1-7). Or when Daniel’s friends survived the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:19-27). Or when any sinner receives undeserved grace (Romans 6:23).

³¹ John 1:-2, 14

³² Matthew 19:26

anything to bring us back to Him.³³ So Jesus went to a cross, dying for our sin, so that we would be reconciled to God.³⁴ That simple gospel truth ought to cause us to be constantly overwhelmed by the grace of God.

Now I'm not saying that if you don't have a constant feeling of being overwhelmed by the grace of God, then you're not saved. I'm not saying that. Obviously, feelings come and go. And even, in our sinfulness, thoughts of reverence come and go. But when you see just how awesome the gospel is, and you're reminded of it, you ought to be blown away by God's love.

So Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" Verse 10.

Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:10)

And, I should admit here, that I'm a teacher in the church, and yet I often don't understand these things either. Verse 11.

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:11-15)

Now, we just stopped at John 3:15, the verse right before John 3:16, because I want you to think about what this passage really says. We quote John 3:16 because it's a great summary of the gospel, and it is, but I want you to notice that the context of John 3:16 is that a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, was completely confused that Jesus would say that in order to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again. That sounds impossible. And in order for us to be born again, the Son of God had to descend from heaven as the Son of Man. That sounds impossible. And in order for any of us to have eternal life, that Son of Man had to be lifted up on a cross, dying for our sins. The Son of God, who is God in the flesh, had to die. And that really sounds impossible.

So, is your salvation possible? Jesus later said, "What's impossible for man is possible for God." For, "nothing is impossible for God."³⁵

And it's in this context that we read John 3:16.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

And did you know what comes after John 3:16? John 3:17. It says:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

³³ Deuteronomy 30:3, 1 John 4:7-10

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:18-19

³⁵ Luke 18:27, 1:37

That sounds pretty impossible. This world is full of corruption. It's full of lies, and hatred, and death, and disobedience, and even rebellion against God.³⁶ And we don't have to look across the world to find these things. We find them in our own hearts.³⁷ So it sounds pretty impossible that God could save the world. It sounds pretty impossible that could save me.

But nothing is impossible for God.

In the end, God makes all things new.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again." And he responded, "How can these things be?" It sounded impossible. And when we hear Jesus say that He came not to condemn the world, but to save it, we think, "How can these things be?" It sounds impossible.

But I think that God wants us to see how impossible it seems so that we would be completely blown away when He succeeds in doing it.

At the end of the book of Revelation, Jesus echoes what He said in John 3:16-17. It says:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne [I think that's Jesus] saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 21:3-5)

You see, in the end, everything will be remade, reborn in Jesus. Because Jesus didn't come to condemn, but to save. And Jesus will accomplish His purpose. God is not a failure.

But God doesn't save the world generally, but specifically. That means God doesn't just save people, but persons. And He does it one soul at a time, as we share the gospel with our neighbor.

I have an annual rhythm in which I gain weight for half of the year, and then attempt to lose weight for half of the year. Just about every year, I unintentionally gain about 30 pounds in the second half of the year with Thanksgiving, Christmas, pizza rolls, and ice cream, and then at the beginning of the year, for about 6 months I have to intentionally lose those 30 pounds. And around March or April of every year, it starts to become noticeable to others, and they start asking me how I lost the weight. And it's a simple answer: diet and exercise. Now I knew that before I lost the weight, and I could have told them the same thing back then, but nobody ever asked me back then. Nobody would have believed me. They would have said I didn't know what I was talking about, or at least that I didn't really believe it myself, or that it just didn't work.

Here's the thing: we need to show people how Jesus has changed our lives. The answer is the same, but people won't believe us until we actually live like we believe it. THEN people will ask us for the reason for the hope that we have.³⁸ You see, if we want other people to believe the gospel and be transformed, then we ourselves need to really believe the gospel and be transformed.

³⁶ Romans 1:28-32

³⁷ Jeremiah 17:9

³⁸ 1 Peter 3:15

So what I'm saying is simply this: Jesus came not just to save the world, but to save you. Will you believe in Him?