



John 3:1-21
So That You May Believe: John
“3:16 - The Numbers of Hope”

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There are occasional times in our lives where a conversation or a decision we make can have a profound, long-lasting impact on us. A first date, a marriage proposal, a conversation over a cup of coffee that leads to a business being started, moving to a new city...there are all kinds of things that can be just moments in time that impact us for years or the rest of our lives. Sometimes we know that to be the case about a conversation or a decision, sometimes we have no idea. For instance, after graduating from college I moved to Sun Valley, and I had no idea it would have a significant impact on the rest of my life. It was just a fun thing to go do for a season of life before getting a real job in the real world.

But that decision led to meeting a youth pastor named Pete who mentored me and encouraged me to consider ministry as my future calling...and here I am. I also met Gwen there, who would ultimately decide to put her marital future in the hands of a ski-bum. I'm not sure her dad was so pleased with that. But that decision, to move to central Idaho for a time, ended up transforming the course of my life because of the people I met, the conversations I had, and the decisions that I made.

This morning we are going to read about a similar kind of moment. It's a conversation that Jesus has with a guy named Nicodemus. It's a profound conversation that we get to enter into, and can change the course of our lives as well. So, let's turn to John 3, as we read about this meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus. We're going to take this passage in sections this morning, rather than reading the whole thing in one fell swoop.

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

There's a bunch of information packed in here that helps us understand how profound this conversation is. **Nicodemus is one of the Jewish religious leaders.** Specifically, he's a Pharisee – which means he adheres strictly to all the religious “stuff” that the Jewish faith requires. In fact, he's on their ruling council – which is called the Sanhedrin. A little bit later we're going to also learn that he is one of Israel's religious teachers. In fact, the Greek reads “*the* teacher of Israel” (not just “a” teacher) – implying he's the top religious teacher.

We also see here that: **He came to Jesus at night.** It's an interesting detail about the conversation. Why did he meet Jesus at night? Pharisees spoke to Jesus during the day all the time – almost always to challenge Jesus. The difference here is that Nicodemus is not challenging him. He's genuinely curious about and interested in Jesus. He's a spiritual seeker who wants to get to the truth, and that's why he goes to Jesus under the cover of night.

Briefly, we also see here that he addresses Jesus respectfully, calling him “Rabbi” – the Jewish word for “teacher.” And lastly, he acknowledges that Jesus is different – he's sent from God. Nicodemus can see this and so can others. So, Nicodemus is meeting with him to have a theological and spiritual discussion. Let's continue reading....

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” ⁴“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. OK...Let's pause here for a moment. Whenever we read of “The kingdom of God” in the New Testament

– whether it’s Jesus’ words or one of the letters of the New Testament from Paul or Timothy or John or whoever – **The Kingdom of God means being among those in this life and the life to come who acknowledge God as Lord of their lives and Lord of all time, space, and eternity.** There is nothing in heaven or under it which does not belong to Jesus, and those who acknowledge that and trust in him, are in His Kingdom. And Jesus is saying that in order to come to that place of acknowledging the one true King, a person must be born again.

So, this is shocking to Nicodemus; it is completely upside down from what he expected. He’s sure of his place in the Kingdom of God – he’s got all the credentials; few Jews, if any, are more credentialed in the faith. And Jesus is saying that none of that matters when it comes to entering into, and being a part of, the Kingdom of God. **The way a person enters the Kingdom of God is to be born again.** Made new. A baby comes into the world without having done a single darn thing to get there. Not one. And Jesus is saying that this is where you begin, if you want to enter the Kingdom of God. All the credentials, titles, achievements, and our efforts at being good don’t matter; acknowledging Jesus as Lord, and being born again is all that matters. And it’s a gift from God. He makes it possible.

In his comments on this passage, author and scholar Roger Fredrikson writes, “This is new life given by God himself, a breaking in of His grace, a supernatural act bringing forth a new creation. Just as a human birth is a mystery, but a very specific reality, so there is a deeper mystery and reality about spiritual birth. Physical life is born through the intimacy of human love shared by male and female...But there is also a spiritual act of divine grace in which God gives himself to a particular person, who, in receiving him, is born a new. **It is in the union of the divine and the human, the supernatural and the natural, the heavenly and the earthly, that new life comes.**”¹

This is to be born again. This is what Jesus is saying must happen in order to enter into God’s Kingdom. And this is God’s doing; God makes this possible, not us. And it completely blows up Nicodemus’ assumptions. He can’t get his head around it. “How can this be?” he asks. Let’s continue:

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

I think there’s a bit of sadness expressed by Jesus here, that Nicodemus doesn’t understand. **Nicodemus is so caught up in the religious stuff, he’s kind of forgotten who he is and who God is.** He’s done all this stuff to get where he is...he’s a religious leader, an expert in their faith, a teacher of their religious stuff...and it’s all gotten in the way of his walk with God. I wonder what accomplishments of ours have gotten in the way of our walk with God? Maybe some of us are like Nicodemus and we think we’ve lived a good enough life to enter into God’ Kingdom. Or maybe we’re at the other end of the spectrum and we have done things that we think prevent us from ever entering in. Nicodemus is certainly in the former of those two possibilities, and it’ preventing us from understanding God’s grace. I think Jesus sees that in him here, and it makes Jesus a bit grieved.

Using this common title “Son of Man,” Jesus helps to explain how this new birth happens by alluding to an event from Numbers 21, in the Old Testament. It’s a bit obscure, really, and kind of a strange passage that puzzles us...where Moses makes a bronze serpent, puts it on a pole so it’s up in the air. And then anyone who was bitten by a poisonous snake – which was a problem they were dealing with at that moment, and people were dying from them – anyone who is bitten and then goes and looks at this bronze snake up on the pole would be saved. They’d be healed. They’d live, rather than die. And Jesus is saying that he is playing that same role. **Whoever comes to the son of man and believes will have eternal life (3:15).**

Then we get to what is probably the most famous verse in all of the Bible, followed by some more teaching that's connected to it. Scholars debate whether Jesus said these next words himself or if they are John the author's words. Remember, in the Greek manuscripts, there's no punctuation, including quote marks. Context and grammar are the clues to where to use those in the English translations. Until recently, the next few verses were attributed to Jesus, but that's being questioned more now. It doesn't change the truth of the words, of course, but I think it's worth acknowledging. So, here's what we read next, after Jesus just talked about believing in him, the Son of Man:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Max Lucado wrote a book maybe 15 years ago or so on John 3:16, and it is titled, "3:16 – The Numbers of Hope." It's where today's sermon title comes from. **There is incredible hope in John 3:16.** And the reason is because this verse essentially contains the entire gospel message. It's exactly what Jesus has been saying to Nicodemus: Our efforts at religion and being "good" and all that don't matter. God gives the "divine Yes" and makes it possible for us to enter the Kingdom of God, not our efforts. And he's done this because he loves us; he's made it possible for all people – the whole world – to enter into this kingdom, and it happens through his one and only Son, Jesus. Faith in him is what leads to the Kingdom...to eternal life.

Again, Roger Fredrikson has some great comments on these verses. He writes, "Here is the urgent paradox, the two-edged meaning of Jesus' coming. He came in love to save, to heal, and to offer spiritual birth. He did not come to condemn or judge. But his coming sharpens the issue. Now we must decide! There is both wondrous possibility and great peril in Nicodemus's coming to Jesus. If he chooses to lay aside all his preconceived ideas and learning and accepts Jesus as the One who has come down from

heaven, he will be born again! But if he chooses to turn aside, to leave, to work out his own salvation by his own stubborn efforts, however noble, he stands under condemnation and will perish.”²

So: There’s incredible hope in these words, but there’s an urgent decision that accompanies it, and it’s a decision that we must make: Are we going to trust in Jesus, or not? Nicodemus, as far as we know, didn’t take that step of faith – though later in John’s gospel he defends Jesus against some other Pharisees, and he helped make sure that Jesus got a proper burial after his crucifixion. Not a proper burial really mattered, but Nicodemus didn’t know what was coming on that first Easter morning. But, we are now in Nicodemus’ shoes, with the invitation from Jesus put forth to us. God has taken the initiative and done his part. Along the way he gives us signs, he puts people in our lives to steer us in the direction of saying “yes”, he gives us conversations and events and experiences that can help steer us toward Jesus. He even has us here this morning. But ultimately we have to set aside our pride and recognize that all of our so-called great accomplishments don’t really add up to all that much...and simply trust in Jesus.

But that’s not to say it’s easy to make that decision, because we are so enticed by the stuff that stands in opposition to Jesus, his grace, and his offer of salvation through faith in him. The rest of the passage makes this clear. Let’s finish things out: ¹⁹ **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** ²⁰ **Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.** ²¹ **But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.**

There just isn’t much that is good and Godly about the darkness, and yet: people love the darkness. But the darkness is not where Jesus wants us to be. It’s usually where bad stuff happens. For instance, this past week, a friend of mine shared what happened to him recently during the dark of night. He writes: “First off ... I AM OK!!! I was a little shaken up and ticked off as I was robbed at a Shell gas station downtown tonight. After my hands stopped trembling I managed to call the police. They were quick to respond and

calmed me down. My money is all gone. The police asked me if I knew who did it. I said yes...It was gas pump number 5!" 😊

More seriously: **Too often, we just don't want to come into the light.** Letting the light of Christ shine in our dark lives cuts through our pride; it can be embarrassing or humiliating...or maybe we love the darkness and we don't want to step out of the shadows because it's comforting, or it's our place of power, lust, greed, etc. But these things can hang over us and eat away at us and erode our relationships with other people and our relationship with God. Jesus calls us out of the shadows and into the light; in fact, he shines the light in the darkness. That can be hard to do, and until we're willing to open our hearts up to his light, it can be difficult to understand and believe what he says.

And yet, that's what God invites us into. He still loves us even when we stay in the darkness. But he invites us to gaze into the eyes of Jesus, who was lifted up on the cross to heal us and save us, and who was raised from the tomb on the third day to give us the hope of eternal life in the Kingdom of God...he invites us to come to him and put our faith in him. Just as Nicodemus came face to face with Jesus in this conversation, now we do as well. **Will we allow this moment, this conversation, to change us and bring us to a life changing, eternity impacting place of faith?** This could be the moment that happens for you, and set your life on a whole new course. God has you here this morning for this very moment. This could be the day that you set aside your pride, let go of your accomplishments to be a good person, acknowledge all that you've done to push God out of your life, and instead become a new creation, become born again, because of his grace.

Just like he did with Nicodemus, Jesus is here, meeting each of us just as we are – both prideful and broken – and he extends to us this offer to believe in him. So, wherever you are in the journey of faith – from “didn't know anything about Jesus until this morning” to “life-long follower” – wherever you are on that spectrum: don't let this moment slip by without impacting you and drawing you deeper into the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Let's pray...Amen.

¹ Roger Fredrickson, *The Preacher's Commentary*, p. 80.

² *Ibid*, p. 85.