

God So Loved This World

John 3:1-17

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I am certain I would not be alone in saying John 3:16 holds a special place in my heart. If I had to choose one verse that captures the essence of the Gospel, one verse that captures the core of the Gospel, one verse that captures the heart and the soul of the Gospel, I am certain I would not be alone in saying that one verse would be John 3:16. “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.” (NIV) Often with a verse that holds such a central place in our faith it speaks most clearly in the King James Translation. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16 not only holds a special place in the Gospel, it holds a special place in the heart because it is a verse that has helped many embrace the gift of life and faith that is offered through Jesus Christ. It is exciting to imagine just how many have tied their personal faith and belief to John 3:16. What is particularly meaningful is directly related to the promise the verse makes, “That whosoever believeth in him”...in Jesus Christ, in God’s only begotten Son...shall not perish but have eternal life.”

The impact of John 3:16 has been felt and experienced in the hearts of believers for some two thousand years. The impact of John 3:16 has been enduring. The impact of John 3:16 has been enormous. The impact of John 3:16 has been epic. Surprisingly, while the impact of John 3:16 has been enduring, and enormous, and epic, the impact of John 3:16 was not immediate. For all we can tell about the first man who heard this epic, enormous, enduring verse, this verse we know as John 3:16, for the first man who heard this verse the impact of the verse was not immediate. From all we know in terms of the impact the verse made on the first man who heard it, it was also not epic or enormous. Not immediately. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus at night. When Nicodemus left it was still night. The lights had not gone on. The bright golden rays of the sun had not shined into his heart, illuminating

Nicodemus with the light of faith. To put it bluntly, when Nicodemus left that night, he had still not seen the light.

The chapter begins on what seems to be a promising note. A Pharisee comes to Jesus. The Pharisee, named Nicodemus, affirms Jesus. The Pharisee, a member of the ruling council, calls Jesus “Rabbi”. Nicodemus, the Pharisee, affirms that Jesus has come from God. The Pharisee, Nicodemus, points to the signs Jesus has been doing as evidence that God is with Jesus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, but all signs point to Nicodemus being ready to see the light.

When Jesus tries to teach Nicodemus a few things, instead of seeing the light Nicodemus seems more like he is lost in the headlights. The teaching of Jesus does not bring clarity. Instead, the teaching of Jesus brings confusion for Nicodemus.

Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Nicodemus is confused. “How can someone be born again when they are old?”

Nicodemus is confounded. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born.”

Jesus talked with Nicodemus about being born again, but the lights did not go on.

The teacher continues. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 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.”

Now Nicodemus is incredulous. “How can this be?”

The teacher gives a rebuke to the student who is so slow to learn. “You are Israel’s teacher, and you do not understand these things...I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life.”

Jesus does not hold out much hope that the light will go on for Nicodemus. I have told you earthly things and you do not get it. How in the world will you understand heavenly things? The encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus ends with a dire assessment of the situation. “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.” From all we can tell Nicodemus leaves in the dark. From all we can tell Nicodemus completely misses the light that has come into the world. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He became confused. The words of Jesus confounded him. As Jesus talked, Nicodemus became incredulous. His inability to understand earthly things did not bode well for him understanding things of heaven. Finally, it seems Nicodemus is sentenced with the verdict that although the light came into the world, he, Nicodemus, was not among those who saw the light.

Things do not bode well for Nicodemus. Nevertheless, despite the darkness that seems to pervade this whole passage, the last verse holds out a glimmer of hope. The verdict about darkness is not the last word. The last word is this: “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.” Nicodemus leaves his midnight meeting with Jesus just as in the dark as when he arrived...but maybe a day will dawn when Nicodemus comes into the light.

Of course, there is another reason to hold onto hope. In the midst of all the confusion and confoundedness and incredulousness and inability to grasp even earthly things, on that dark night when Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus, Nicodemus heard words that were heard for the first time

by human ears. Nicodemus was first to hear these words. “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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Words like that have a habit of piercing the darkness and filling the world with the light of Christ. So, yes, there is another reason to hold onto hope that one day Nicodemus will come into the light.

But goodness, that poor Pharisee’s head must have been swimming by the time he left Jesus alone in the darkness. As that night came to an end maybe Nicodemus made his way to his mother’s house, thinking a nice home cooked breakfast would clear away the cobwebs and help him to see things in the light of day. As he sat in the kitchen, he had to tell his mom about the talk with Jesus. “This guy told me the strangest thing. He said if I wanted to see the kingdom of God I had to be born again. I asked him pointblank if I was supposed to enter my mother’s womb a second time to be born again.” Nicodemus looked at his mom. His mom looked right back at him. Nicodemus tilted his head to the side with a quizzical look. His mother said with a steely resolve only a mother could have, “Not on your life.”

As his mother shooed him out of her kitchen, he was greeted by a gust of wind rushing down the street. Then the wind abruptly shifted direction. “What did that Rabbi say about the wind blowing where it wants...and about the Spirit doing the same thing?” Looking up to the sky the brightness of the Sun shined like heaven above. “Did he really say there was someone who had gone up into heaven...just like they had come down from heaven...and I think he was hoping I would realize he was talking about himself.” Good grief, he even brought up that strange story from the desert when Moses held up a bronze snake. If anyone lifted their eyes and looked at the bronze snake, they would be saved from an attack of real snakes slithering down on the ground. As if anyone could make sense of that story, he said the Son of Man, apparently the same one who came down from heaven, would be lifted up...and anyone who believes in him will have eternal life. Is Jesus going to be lifted up on a stick? Will people who look at him on that stick be saved and have eternal life. I

thought it was dark when I knocked on his door last night. Now things are pitch black. I don't get it.

With a verse as important to our faith as John 3:16, I would hate for us to be in the dark today. And yet I would not blame anyone if they felt like Nicodemus. Being born again, the Spirit blowing where it wants, a Son of Man who comes and goes from heaven, that Son of Man lifted up on a stick, we might feel like Nicodemus. Jesus talks but it feels like it is night. We come to Jesus in the dark. After he speaks, we might still be in the dark. Thankfully, Jesus does not want us to be in the dark. Neither does John, the writer of the Gospel. John does not want us to be in the dark.

The Gospel of John begins by telling us the Word of God, the Word who was with God, the Word who is God, has become flesh. In becoming flesh, in entering our world, the Word brought life, and that life was the light of the world. The light, the Word of God who became flesh, is Jesus. Jesus is the Son of Man. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. The powerful promise is that the darkness will not overcome the light. John tells us that when Jesus came into the world, when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, those who believed in the power of his name were given the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but children who are born of God. (John 1:12, 13) Nicodemus did not know it, but when he came to Jesus that night, he came to the one who is the Light of the World. Nicodemus came to the right place to find light. Nicodemus came to the right person to find light. Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again. How can someone be born again? Believe in Jesus! Believe in Jesus and he will give you new birth. You will be born again as a child of God. The birth will not be a physical birth. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Being born again will be a spiritual birth.

None of these spiritual things would make sense except for this one amazing fact. The person telling us these things has come from heaven and will return to heaven. The person telling us these things is able to speak of heavenly things because he knows these things first-hand. He is the one who is the Word of God, the one who was with God in the beginning. He is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us.

Now Nicodemus, listen carefully. People were dying in the desert, but they looked up at the bronze snake Moses had fixed to his staff and they were saved. Jesus is saying, “I will be lifted up.” Everyone who looks at Jesus, who believes in Jesus, will be saved. They will have eternal life. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people.” How does Jesus bring us eternal life? John the Baptist gives us a huge clue. “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus brings forgiveness. Jesus takes away the sin of the world.

How does Jesus bring forgiveness? How does Jesus take away the sin of the world? He was lifted up. Jesus was lifted up. Nicodemus was in the dark the first night he came to Jesus. He had no clue what Jesus meant when Jesus said he would be lifted up. A few years later, during the Passover Festival, it became as clear as daylight what it meant for Jesus to be lifted up. Jesus spoke of a verdict between light and darkness when he talked with Nicodemus that first night. On the last night Jesus was alive in his earthly body, a verdict was pronounced against him. The crowds shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” Pilate, the Roman ruler, handed Jesus over to be crucified. When Jesus was crucified, he was lifted up on the cross.

Apparently, Nicodemus was there that day. He came to Jesus the first time at night. Now, on the day Jesus died, it was broad daylight. In the darkness of their first meeting Jesus had said, “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” Did those words start to make sense to Nicodemus that day, when it was broad daylight and God’s Beloved Son was lifted up on the cross? God so loved the world. Maybe Nicodemus had learned about the words Jesus said so recently, to his closest disciples. “Greater love has no man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends.” When Jesus was lifted up, he was laying down his life for his friends. “For God so loved the world he gave...” Jesus was laying down his life. The Father was giving the life of his Beloved Son, his only begotten Son.

Jesus was condemned to die, but condemnation was not why Jesus had come. Nicodemus had heard Jesus say he had not come to condemn the world but to save the world. Watching Jesus die, watching Jesus lay down his life, watching Jesus live out the prophecy that he was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, watching how in broad daylight the darkness tried to overcome the light only to find that Jesus remained faithful, did Nicodemus finally begin to see the light? Did Nicodemus finally feel the tug in his heart to believe in Jesus, to trust in Jesus? Did Nicodemus yearn to be born again, to have Jesus give him the right to be called a child of God, a child born not of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husband's will, but a child born of God?

Staring at Jesus, lifted up on that stick we know as the cross, surely Nicodemus noticed that there was a sign fastened to the cross. The sign read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. The sign was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Nicodemus belonged to a group that set themselves apart from others. The Pharisees were not alone. There were other groups, other sects like the Sadducees and the Essenes, other groups who thought they were the only ones who were faithful. That was just within the Jewish community. There were also Greeks and Romans. There were Samaritans. As Nicodemus read the sign about Jesus being King of the Jews written in three languages, did a light go on that said, "God loves the world...the whole world." We all have a tendency to find our own group where we belong, where we think and act the same, but Jesus came for the whole world. The sign was in three languages. There was a fourth language being spoken on the cross. That fourth language was Body Language. The arms of Jesus were stretched out wide, wide enough to embrace all the people, all the cultures, all the customs, all the languages, all the colors, all the races, all the hurts, all the needs, all the longings, all the hopes, all the failures, all the sorrow, all the sadness. Maybe it is that fourth language of the cross, Body Language, arms stretched wide to embrace a world that God loves, maybe it is Body Language that speaks most poignantly to us from the cross. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

There must have been so many thoughts and emotions swirling in the heart and mind of Nicodemus as Jesus was lifted up on the cross. The death of Jesus impacted Nicodemus in a great way, of that we are sure. After Jesus died, after Jesus suffered and died, a man named Joseph of Arimathea asked the Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, if he could have the body of Jesus. Interestingly enough, Joseph asked Pilate in secret because he feared the Jewish leaders. That might be the same fear that caused Nicodemus to come to Jesus at night in their first meeting. Joseph of Arimathea was given permission to take the body of Jesus. He wrapped the body with spices in strips of linen and put the body of Jesus in a tomb where no one had ever been laid. When Joseph took the body of Jesus and wrapped his dead body in strips of linen with spices, he was not working alone. Someone had come alongside Joseph of Arimathea to help with the burial of Jesus. The person who came alongside to help with the burial of Jesus was none other than Nicodemus. Writing about the burial of Jesus, a burial Nicodemus helped with, one person makes the brilliant comment, “It was broad daylight.” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

Looking back on the first meeting Nicodemus had with Jesus, the meeting that took place under cover of darkness, even though Jesus told Nicodemus a verse that was told for the first time, even though Nicodemus was first to hear that verse, the verse that says, “For God so loved the world...” the impact was not immediate. Nicodemus came in the dark and he left in the dark. Nicodemus did not see the light...that night. But there he was on the day Jesus died. There Nicodemus was, helping with the body, helping with the burial. And it was no longer night. Did Nicodemus finally see the light?

John’s Gospel does not tell us anything more about Nicodemus after that day he helped with the burial. John does not tell us if Nicodemus saw the light. So, I guess we are in the dark when it comes to knowing if Nicodemus saw the light. But it is intriguing to look back on that night when these two had their first meeting. There was Jesus. And there was Nicodemus. And there was no one else. Only one person heard Jesus say, “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Only one person heard Jesus say those words. And yet we all have those

words now. Those words have been written not just in Aramaic, and Greek, and Latin. Those words have been written in countless ages and read by countless people. More important than the fact that the words have been written and read by many is the impact those words have had for so many. The impact on Nicodemus was not immediate. And yet today we have those words, those words that are epic, and enormous, and thankfully, enduring.

Those words are here with us today. I don't know for sure, but it makes a lot of sense that those words are with us because those words did impact the life of Nicodemus. Maybe not immediately. But those words impacted the life of Nicodemus in ways that changed him forever, and for the better. I believe those words finally answered the question that at first puzzled Nicodemus. How can a person be born again? Believe in Jesus is the answer to that question. Believe in Jesus and you will be born again, born of the Spirit, born into his kingdom. You will be a child of God. Today Jesus is lifted up. Jesus is always lifted up. His arms are extended, just like the love of God, a love that reaches to all people in all times and in all places. "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Amen!