

March 12, 2017 – John 3:1-17

“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 might very well be the best known verse in the entire Bible. For most Christians, it's the very first Bible verse they memorize. For some Christians, it's the only Bible verse they memorized. And just about anyone with any Christian background at all is familiar with it.

And for good reason. It's a great verse. The Gospel in a nutshell. Out of his love, God the Father sent his Son, Jesus, to us so that we might not die, but live forever. So simple. So important.

And yet, John 3:16 doesn't stand alone. Most people forget that there's also a John 3:17. Which is directly linked to the previous verse. And equally important, I think. Equally the Gospel in a nutshell. Maybe even more-so.

Because John 3:17 doesn't just tell us what God did. It also tells us why God did it. “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.”

Perhaps the reason why people tend not to remember John 3:17 is because it's a much more complex discussion. It's not just Gospel. It's Law too. And, in its own way, it's a much fuller answer to the discussion that Jesus was previously having with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is an interesting fellow. John describes him as a ruler of the Jews. Which is another way of saying he's a member of the Jewish high council. A group known as the Sanhedrin. A governing body made up of the most respected rabbis and scribes and priests of the people.

He'll appear twice more in John's gospel. And, from the looks of it, he will eventually become one of Jesus' followers. Urging the Jewish authorities not to arrest Jesus until they have solid evidence. And openly assisting in Jesus' burial.

But at this point, Nicodemus is not a follower of Jesus. He's not a believer in Jesus. In fact, he's not even willing to be seen publicly with Jesus in broad daylight. No, Nicodemus will only meet with Jesus secretly, under the cover of night.

But he is curious. He's curious about this man who does signs and miracles. He's curious about this man who teaches with such authority. He's curious about this man who really does seem to be sent by God.

So he goes to Jesus, one rabbi to another. One teacher to another. To have an in depth discussion with him. Really get down into nitty-gritty theology. Things that are important to the Jews.

And what Jesus says absolutely baffles him. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Huh?

Now, you have to understand, to us the phrase “born again” has become a fairly common theological term. I remember in college, for example, I was talking to an atheist about my faith. And he asked me point blank, “Would you call yourself a born again Christian?”

It took me off guard, actually. I didn't expect to hear that kind of Christian jargon from a man who had zero religious background. But that just goes to show how commonplace the term has become.

For Nicodemus, this was all very, very unfamiliar. Born again? How does that work? I mean, he doesn't really know Jesus all that well. For all he knows, Jesus might be leading some sort of crazy cult that actually does believe you can be put back into your mother's womb.

So Jesus clarifies this all for him. “No, no, no. Here's what I mean. Unless you're reborn of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Flesh gives birth to flesh. Your parents were flesh. You are a product of their flesh. Your DNA is 50% from your father and 50% from your mother. Any time that a baby is born, there will inevitably be a discussion about who that child looks like more: his mother or his father.

The people of Jesus' day may not have understood the science of genetics, but they understood that a child has the same characteristics as his parents. Flesh gives birth to flesh.

So also the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Just as you got your flesh from your parents, you also got your spirit from your parents. A spirit of sin. Of rebellion. Of death.

We were talking about this just last week in Bible class after church. Take a glass of clean water. Put one drop of blue dye into it and the whole glass turns blue. Dilute that glass of water with another gallon of clean water, and it will still be blue. Dilute it with 10 gallons of clean water, and it will still be blue. It may be harder and harder to see, but it's still there. You can hide the impurity in the water, but you'll never get rid of it.

The same is true of Adam and Eve. That original sin in our souls was passed down and passed down and passed down. Generation after generation. And the worst part is, we don't even dilute it. We add to it. We commit our own sins that just pour more dye into the water. So that it just gets worse and worse and worse.

If you want to get rid of that impurity, the only way to do it is to start over with a new glass of water. To be reborn. Not by human parents of flesh and sin. But by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit.

That's what baptism is. It's to be reborn of water and the Spirit. It's to take a person of flesh with parents of flesh and a spirit of sin, and say, "Be reborn. Be a person of the Holy Spirit with God as your Father and a Spirit in His holy image. Welcome into the kingdom of God."

But Nicodemus has a little trouble with this. You see, Nicodemus is a Jew. He is a man of the Law. Being a Jew is all about two things: your birth by the flesh, as a descendent of Abraham, and your obedience to the Law, as a student of Moses. But Jesus has just thrown those two things out the window. None of it makes sense to him.

To which Jesus essentially replies, "You're right. It doesn't make sense... to you. It makes perfect sense to God. Because he's the one in control here. Not you. The wind blows where it wishes. All you can do is listen to it.

The Holy Spirit blows where he wishes. All you can do is listen to him. The Holy Spirit will enter whatever heart he chooses to. And you can't control him. Not by birth. Not by obedience. If God wants to save a person, then he will save them. Period.

Male or female. Infant or adult. Jew or Gentile. Sinner or saint. It doesn't matter. Salvation is an act of God. It is indeed a rebirth. You are as much in control of your own salvation as you were in being born. Your parents chose to give you birth by the flesh. God chose to give you rebirth by the Spirit. The wind blows where it chooses. The Spirit saves whomever he wishes to save.

And the Law that Nicodemus clings to? The Law that the Jews clung to? The Law that many Christians still cling to? That Law was never about condemnation. It was always about salvation.

Moses himself knew that, and he delivered that Law to us. Because when the Israelites broke that Law, complained against Moses and against the Lord, and were punished with swarms of fiery, venomous snakes. It was Moses who set up a bronze serpent on a pole. And anyone who looked upon it would be healed.

God didn't want his people to die of snake bites in the desert. He didn't send those snakes to kill off his people. The Law was always meant to drive them back to repentance and His salvation. And that doesn't mean that God is uncaring or unjust or unfaithful. It simply means that God chooses to have mercy on whom he will have mercy. And that mercy is out of our hands. It is by grace that you have been saved.

So also it is with Jesus Christ. The new serpent raised up on a pole. That whoever looks on him will find healing and eternal life. For God does so love the world that he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world. He could have. According to Nicodemus and the Jews and our own consciences, he should have. But he didn't. He did not send his Son to judge us guilty of our sins. He did not send his Son to leave us dying from the venom of a fiery serpent called the devil.

No, he sent his Son to be lifted up on a cross. That whole world – past, present, and future – might be saved through him. God has mercy on whom he will have mercy. He gives rebirth and salvation to whomever he chooses. And by water and the Spirit, he has chosen you. Amen.