

Look on Him and be saved!

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[0 : 00] If you've ever been to Florence, you might have seen my favorite sculpture when you were there,! This is a sculpture that depicts the moment that Jesus was taken down from the cross.

! And there are four figures in the sculpture.! There's Mary Magdalene, Jesus's legs are kind of draped over her. There's Mary, the mother of Jesus, supporting Jesus's body, Jesus himself. And then Nicodemus standing behind the other three figures, kind of like this. It's a huge statue. And I had the privilege of spending a morning with this statue 20-something years ago now. And it's one of those experiences that I just remember sitting there and being just gutted by it. And there were two things that really stood out to me as I just spent time staring at it. One is that there are chisel marks all over, particularly all over Nicodemus. And we know that Michelangelo was 70, around 70, when he started work on this statue.

[1 : 05] And so he was really old to be doing this kind of physical labor. We also know this was a statue that he didn't receive a commission for. This was something he wanted to use for his own tomb.

So that's one thing. But then the other thing that is really striking is that Nicodemus' face is Michelangelo's face. And we know that Michelangelo was a man who wrestled deeply with his faith from his writings.

And so it seems fitting that he would have felt a connection to Nicodemus, who we'll learn more about this morning in this conversation we just read about with Jesus. And this conversation is relevant for us too.

It's really pivotal to our understanding of the gospel. And it's gonna help us answer three questions. What do we want? How are we missing the big picture?

And what's our true hope for transformation? Would you pray with me? Oh, Lord, soften our hearts to hear from you this morning.

[2 : 12] If there are places where we aren't able to hear from you, places where you are not Lord of our lives, we want to lay ourselves before you, Lord.

Would you lighten our darkness? Would you be the teacher? Not my words, but yours, Lord. Thank you for this space to gather. Would your spirit fall on us?

In the name of Jesus, amen. I'd encourage you all to pull out your Bibles if you brought them this morning, just because we're gonna be going through the text pretty closely, verse by verse, so it might just help you follow along.

So when we read a passage like this in the Bible, there are a couple things that we wanna keep in mind, just as we're sitting with it and marinating in it. So one of those things is we wanna think about how the people actually in this scene would have understood what was going on.

So how would Nicodemus have been able to receive and hear the words that Jesus was saying? The second thing is how would those reading this or hearing John's gospel, John's readers, how would they have understood this passage?

[3 : 18] And then after we've answered those first two, then we can think about what does it look like for us today to study this passage. But we can't get to that third person, that third question, without locating ourselves within the first two.

So we'll be pressing into those a little bit this morning. And we see in so many of Jesus' dialogues with people, and especially this one, that they come expressing one desire, but he redirects them, and he speaks to a deeper, unexpressed need.

He knows what they really need. He corrects their misunderstandings, and he reveals himself. And in this conversation, what we're gonna see is that Jesus expands Nicodemus' understanding of the kingdom of God and his mission far beyond what Nicodemus thought it meant.

So let's set the scene a little bit with Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus at night. They're probably sitting up on the rooftop because that would have been the coolest part of the house where Jesus was staying.

They may have each had a few disciples with them. We're not sure. Nicodemus was both a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. So not every Pharisee was a member of the Sanhedrin. [4 : 35] Pharisees were really the moral exemplars at the time. And if you've read the Gospels, you know that they were typically opposing Jesus. The Sanhedrin was a governing body of priests, elders, and scribes.

And they had the final say in disputes over Jewish law. They decided cases of blasphemy. They were the ones that actually wanted to get Jesus crucified. And so men were appointed to serve on this body based on their learning and their knowledge.

So the fact that Nicodemus had both these credentials, Pharisee and Sanhedrin, meant that he was really the cream of the crop intellectually. So why did he come at night?

That's a question we have to ask. It could have been purely logistical. You know, Jesus was getting pretty famous at this point. It was at the point in his ministry where he was being followed by large crowds.

It would have been really hard to have an extended one-on-one conversation with him. He was probably really exhausted. And yet he took this time with Nicodemus having this extended conversation.

[5 : 45] And whatever the practical logistics may have been, I think there's also a strong chance that Nicodemus didn't want anyone to know that this meeting was happening. He probably wanted it to be undercover.

He had a reputation to uphold. But there's something deeper going on here too. In the larger context of John's gospel and his letters, night and darkness are associated with spiritual blindness. So while this conversation likely did take place physically at night, John's leading us somewhere deeper. This teacher of the law, this moral exemplar, this member of the Sanhedrin is sitting in deep spiritual darkness.

Darkness that is deeper than he knows. And Nicodemus' opening statement reveals his purpose, his reason for talking to Jesus. What he thinks he wants.

Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could do these signs you are doing without God. And I think there are a few things we want to note here.

[6 : 50] First of all, Nicodemus addresses Jesus respectfully. He says, Rabbi. So even though he was probably much older than Jesus to have the status that he had, he recognizes that Jesus is someone worthy of respect.

But still, he's mainly trying to figure out how do you do these things that you do? How do you do exorcisms? How do you do miracles? All of these things that people are talking about. Maybe he wants to go back and report to his colleagues what he learns.

But instead, Jesus redefines the conversation with his statement in verse three. Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

He uses that phrase very truly, I tell you, three times in this passage, meaning, listen up and pay attention. So immediately, Nicodemus is probably thinking, was I asking about the kingdom of God? I didn't think I was asking about the kingdom of God. But Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to answer, to ask a better question. Instead of, I just wanna understand how you do miracles, Jesus is right away from the get-go, trying to lead him out of darkness to salvation, to speak to his true need.

[8 : 19] And this phrase, kingdom of God, was a weighty one for the Jews at the time. It would have made Nicodemus kind of perk up and take notice. Because throughout the Old Testament, kingdom of God implied both the presence of God, who was king authoritatively, and this domain to rule.

Now, the prevailing Jewish teaching of the day associated the kingdom of God with the coming of the Messiah. These two things were seen as being in lockstep together.

And it was also seen as an eschatological, that's a hard word to say, end times event. Meaning the present age was gonna come to an end and the new Jerusalem would come.

And you can imagine how much the Jews longed for this event. After multiple occupations, after being in exile, after they're in their current occupation, Rome is occupying them.

I think we long for it too, don't we? I mean, look at what's happening in Iran right now. We long for the Lord to come and make all things new, the way we sang.

[9 : 25] But here's the thing. Jesus is gonna redefine the way that the prevailing Jewish teaching was interpreting this at the time. His ministry of preaching and healing has made it clear that the kingdom of God isn't just imminent, but that God's mission is being fulfilled in him right in that moment.

What did Jesus say? The first time he got up to preach in the book of Luke, in Luke's gospel, he quotes Isaiah, words that everyone in that synagogue would have been familiar with.

The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he preaches that, and then he proceeds to live it out through the healing ministry that he has, through the preaching, through exorcisms. And so Nicodemus is sitting here, you know, he's hearing Jesus say this, he's flipping through his mental Rolodex, and he's thinking about all the kingdom of God and Messiah prophecies he knows, which I'm sure are many because he was so educated.

And yet, can you picture Jesus leaning forward towards him? Like, Nicodemus, the messianic salvation and fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies that you've heard and learned your whole life is sitting right here.

[10 : 53] It's me. That salvation you've been longing and searching for isn't just a future thing. It's a thing that's happening now. So Jesus is shifting this paradigm to a two-part fulfillment.

His miracles, his healings, his exorcisms testify to abundant life in the present and everlasting life in the age to come, the consummation of the kingdom.

This was a new revelation. So let's just pause here. Let's zoom out for just a minute and think about how this is sitting with us. So, does anybody here identify with Nicodemus?

Is anybody educated? Did anybody come to D.C. because they have a high-powered job? I think that there's probably some likelihood that D.C. is a city full of Nicodemuses, intellectual, top-of-the-class, valedictorians, used to setting agendas, defining the terms of a meeting, used to having power and authority.

And none of those is a bad thing, right? But let me just ask you a few questions from these verses. If you go to meet with Jesus, who sets the agenda?

[12 : 06] And who's asking the questions? You know, I was talking to somebody the other day about Lent, and she said, my Lenten discipline this year is that I'm taking 10 minutes three times a day, morning, around lunchtime, and nighttime, just to sit.

I set a timer, and I just sit in the Lord's presence. I don't say anything. I just come to be with God. And sometimes it's really hard, right?

Sometimes that's a long 10 minutes. Sometimes it's really beautiful. But what if we did that, y'all? What if we set a timer? What if we said, I just wanna be with God?

And that's the point, being with God, being part of his life. Let me ask you another question. Are you coming to Jesus in the dark or in the light?

So coming back to Michelangelo's story for just a little bit, we know that after he worked on this statue for eight years, he tried to destroy it. Now, we don't know exactly why, but I think a particularly compelling story, one theory, is that there was a sect going on in Florence at that time.

[13 : 26] A group actually called the Nicodemus. And the Nicodemus were Catholic, but they believed in Protestant views of salvation. So they believed in salvation by grace, coming in faith, but they didn't wanna separate from the Catholic church.

Well, so the Pope at that time, Paul IV, found out about this group, and he launched an inquisition against them. And while we don't know if Michelangelo was formally part of this group, we do know that he went into hiding.

He felt like he had to live in secrecy. And so he did destroy this statue or tried to, but his face is the face of Nicodemus, remains intact.

So ultimately, he was identified with it. And he was identified with the suffering Christ. So most of us face far lesser penalties for publicly professing our faith.

And yet many of us remain silent. When people ask you, what are you doing this weekend? Maybe you say something like, well, I'm having brunch on Saturday, and Sunday afternoon, I have a

soccer game.

[14:38] Sunday morning, I'm seeing some friends somewhere in an undisclosed location. I mean, my neighbors see me rolling out all the time in my collar.

But if they believed that I thought that Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him, if I actually just sat them down and publicly professed that to them, I don't know how that would go.

But what if we're the instrument, what if I'm the instrument for these neighbors to come to know Jesus, to come out of the darkness into the light of his kingdom? We need to think about this, y'all. So as this conversation develops, let's talk about how Nicodemus and how we lose sight of the big picture. Let's go back to verse three again.

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again. Nicodemus would have thought, like all observant Jews, that in addition to the kingdom kind of being some future thing, that he was in good shape for the kingdom of God.

[15:42] And for that matter, John's readers and probably a lot of us would have thought the same thing. Entry into the kingdom of God was based on personal righteousness and on being Jewish, one of God's chosen people.

But Jesus throws him a curveball or whatever the first century equivalent of a curveball is with this second part of this statement, unless they're born again.

Nicodemus' immediate response to this is probably some light sarcasm, laughter, maybe a little bit of fear. How can someone be born when they're old?

Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb. Jesus responds by saying, someone must be born of water and the spirit.

And this is so beautiful because he's speaking so specifically to Nicodemus and his vocation as a teacher of the law, as someone who knew the scriptures.

[16:48] He's really trying to lead Nicodemus here because this combination of water and the spirit is from a passage that he would have known really well from Ezekiel, where the Lord says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols.

I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. So Jesus is reminding Nicodemus, hey, remember this prophecy?

Remember Ezekiel? He's reminding him that the spirit is the one causing the obedience and righteousness. It's not something we initiate. Now in the Old Testament, ritual cleansing with water was done to rid yourself of impurity.

And the spirit, or ruach, is the Hebrew word, affects the transformation of the heart. Ruach is the same word used when Genesis talks about the spirit of God hovering over the waters.

[18:03] It's the creative implement of God's nature. Again, like most Pharisees, Nicodemus was probably so convinced of his own righteousness that he was like, I'm good.

I don't need this cleansing and renewal. He's not talking about me. But born of water in the spirit means an impartation of God's very nature. And this isn't something we can force or manufacture. Some of you who were here last week heard Pastor Thomas' sermon on Psalm 51. And if you haven't had a chance to listen to it, please do go back and listen about how Lent is about the restoration and recovery of joy.

And one of the big takeaways was that true joy isn't something that we manufacture. It's something that when we come in repentance and in humility, the spirit works that in us as we confess.

It's the same thing here. This impartation of God's nature isn't something we manufacture ourselves. Think about the beginning of the college we prayed this morning. Almighty God, God, you know that we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves.

[19:15] We can't just sit here and we can't just say like, be more like God. It doesn't work that way. It'd be like trying to make the wind blow a certain way. But it blows where it pleases, as Jesus says in verse eight.

So at this point, I think Nicodemus is probably starting to get a little nervous because he says, how can this be? He's not trying to be funny. He's not trying to kind of deflect anything.

He's just like, oh my goodness. And I think you can sense his anxiety because think about it. He's devoted his whole life going one way towards a certain paradigm.

He had it all figured out, right? Check the boxes, righteousness, all of this. What if I've been wrong this whole time? He might be thinking.

And Jesus once more asks him another question. Jesus asks the best questions. Designed to cut to the heart. You are Israel's teacher.

[20 : 17] And do you not understand these things? He goes on to say, you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

So what Jesus is saying here is Nicodemus, you bear some responsibility for this blindness. You are a teacher of Israel. You are fully equipped to recognize that the Messiah is sitting right in front of you but you're ignorant.

You're focused on signs but not on the big picture of the kingdom that they point to. What Jesus is really saying is that Nicodemus' failure of understanding was not a failure of intellect or knowledge. It was a failure of belief. Belief in Jesus' witness and testimony. And again, it's like you can almost hear the gears in Nicodemus' mind.

I've been searching for this my whole life. What would this mean for me if he's right? This isn't how I thought this would go. I think we have to grapple with these same questions, church.

[21 : 24] There's a reason that a lot of us spend our whole lives in church with no real transformation, with no real effect on our daily lives. And Jesus has harsh words for people like that.

He says, this people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. And that's because there's a failure of belief happening, a failure to believe Jesus' testimony about who he says he is, and a failure to believe how deeply we need cleansing and heart transformation.

So we have to ask ourselves, where are we looking? Where are we looking for that transformation? Like Pastor Thomas said last week, are there areas of our lives that we keep kind of plugging up that we're not willing to bring to the Lord because we're afraid of what it might mean?

Because we're afraid of what we'd have to change. But y'all, Lent is a time to lay ourselves bare. It's a holy invitation to let the Spirit come in and transform us to submit to that.

And that is a blessed relief. This brings us to our last point, our true hope for transformation. Again, we see the way that Jesus dignifies Nicodemus, that he really meets him where he is by drawing this parallel between himself and the true story and the story of the Israelites in the wilderness from this book of Numbers.

[22 : 57] Let me read it quickly. They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way. They spoke against God and against Moses and said, why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

There is no bread, there is no water, and we detest this miserable food. Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them. They bit people and many Israelites died.

The people came to Moses and said, we sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord said to Moses, make a snake and put it on a pole and anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. And so Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole.

And then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. And we know if we continue on in the story of the Israelites, this was a temporary salvation.

[24 : 02] In fact, in the book of Kings, there's a part where King Hezekiah actually has to destroy the snake because people believe that it had magical powers instead of recognizing it as for what it was, an instrument of grace from God.

And the people fell back into cycles of sin again and again. And Nicodemus knows this story just like he knows the prophet Ezekiel. And he wouldn't have understand the context of the cross yet like we do, like John's readers would have.

But he's clearly inviting Nicodemus into new birth and healing with himself as a means of grace for that, as the grace. And so just as the Israelites can look at the snake and be saved from the poison infecting them, so Nicodemus and we can look at Jesus and be saved from the poison of sin.

So we come to it at last. John 3, 16. Probably the most famous verse in the Bible. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.

We see this verse by the highway. We see it at sports games on posters. We see it on drink cups at In-N-Out Burger. As a matter of fact, FYI, if you're ever traveling in the West.

[25 : 28] But like Nicodemus, so many of us have a limited understanding of this verse. Maybe we're thinking that this eternal life business is just for the future.

We're like, well, I do believe and I'm really glad that I'll be in heaven with Jesus and have eternal life someday. Or we might think, what's the point?

All this eternal life stuff sounds suspect anyway. The present world is what we get and then we're done. But that phrase, whoever believes in him, is really key here because the word belief harkens back to John's prologue in chapter one where he talks about to those who believed in him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

And so we're not just reborn. We're born into something. We're born into the life of Christ. We're born into a family of believers.

And that starts now. It starts now. And this is for the world. So again, Jesus is massively expanding this from just being for the Jews to being for the whole world.

[26 : 44] And that includes you, it includes me, it includes everybody throughout time and space. That is why Jesus came. And so no matter what you've done, who you are, Jesus wants to give you eternal life.

And that life starts now. This conversation isn't the end of Nicodemus' story. John writes about him in two more key scenes.

In one scene, the Sanhedrin's trying to arrest Jesus. And Nicodemus says, does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he's been doing?

And he gets ridiculed by the whole group, like, oh, do you support him too? And then we see him a second time. We see him after Jesus' crucifixion.

And so this scene that Michelangelo carved out of a block of marble, in some fashion, it really happened. And Nicodemus was really there. Because under Roman law, a person's body could be claimed from the cross by next of kin.

[27 : 50] But in a case of sedition, which is what the charges were against Jesus, in a case of sedition, often the bodies were left for the vultures, left to rot.

They could be up on the cross for weeks. So Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who John says was a disciple but in secret for fear of the Jews, they go and they ask Pilate for Jesus' body.

And Pilate says yes. So they actually took Jesus' body down from the cross. So think about the tenderness and the intimacy of this.

Jesus' body was covered in blood and sweat and bruises. He was broken. He was limp. Dead. They would have washed his scarred, washed all the blood off his scarred body.

And then it says Nicodemus brought 75 pounds of spices. And they wrapped him in linen cloth. Spices meant for a king. And y'all remember all of Jesus' disciples had fled at this point.

[29 : 03] And while his mother and some of the other women had stayed, they didn't have the money or the power or the influence to do this but Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did. And although they had been unwilling until this moment to publicly affiliate themselves with Jesus, they stepped forward.

They risked their lives and their position. Why would they do this? Because they were reborn. They were given new hearts.

Because their encounters with the love of Christ gave them courage to step out of the darkness into the day. And y'all, you have to remember they didn't know the resurrection was coming.

This was Saturday. As far as they knew, they had nothing to gain and everything to lose. they didn't know what was coming.

But we do. We do. So the questions for you this morning are, will you let him lead you out of darkness into life in him?

[30 : 17] And will you look at him and let him transform you and give you a new heart? Let's pray.

Lord, we are in desperate need of you and in your transformation. I pray that we would be open and willing to step out of the darkness into the light.

Lord, we thank you for your spirit that works in us. We long for new hearts. We long for your work of transformation. And thank you that we get to do this with you, Jesus.

Thank you that eternal life means life in you. So would you give us courage when there are places of unbelief in us, Lord, would you help our unbelief that we may come to you in faith and be

transformed.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.