

# The Insider

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 18 January 2026

Preacher: Rev. Andrew Ong

[ 0 : 00 ] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christchurch. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christchurch.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Hear the word of God as it is read from the gospel according to John.

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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.

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

Jesus answered, 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.

[ 1 : 09 ] 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. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and you do not understand these things. 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. 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 ever gone into heaven except the one who has come 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 in him. 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.

[ 2 : 11 ] 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. This is the verdict.

Light has come into the world, but people love 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.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has not been done in the sight of God. This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Christ. Let's pray. Lord, would you accomplish through the power of your word and even in spite of your messenger, all that you desire to accomplish.

Would you show us the power, the richness, and the love that you so love to communicate to us in your word and in the preaching of it.

[ 3 : 15 ] Lord, would you convict us of sin? Would you stir up repentance amongst your people? And would your spirit move in ways that can only be ascribed to you, Father?

So hear our prayers and be present to us, Lord God. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. So I really should have included the last three verses of chapter 2 in our scripture reading.

I'm really sorry to include that, but I want to read that to you just to give us some context for where we are in John's Gospel coming into John chapter 3 this morning. In the last three verses of John chapter 2, it's very important.

It links into John chapter 3. What it says is, So what's going on as we come into John chapter 3 is Jesus is gaining a following up to this point, but also he's unimpressed and he's unaffected by that following.

Why? Because he knows that there is a kind of belief that's real admiration, real interest, even real respect, and yet still inadequate, still incomplete.

[ 4 : 31 ] And so coming into chapter 3, John here is giving us an example of this kind of incomplete, inadequate faith. Verse 1, Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus here, he serves as a picture of the kind of sincere, respectful, and yet incomplete belief that Jesus, our Savior, he's always going to confront. He's always going to confront this kind of incomplete belief.

Now I want to be very clear, Nicodemus isn't a villain here. He's not hostile, he's not mocking, he's not immoral. He's actually quite sincere, thoughtful, curious, and respectful.

He's a Pharisee, and in their world, Pharisees were the serious, devout ones. And he was one of their best. He was one of the ruling council members. Jesus later calls him the teacher of Israel.

Nicodemus was the kind of person people looked up to and said, that's a real man of God. And yet verse 2 here tells us something subtle but deeply revealing.

[ 5 : 30 ] He came to Jesus when? At night. And listen, John doesn't tell us this detail by accident. And actually every preacher and commentator that I consulted, they pretty much agree on why Nicodemus is coming at night to Jesus.

Nicodemus comes at night not because he's fake or two-faced, but because there's a disconnect within him. There's a gap between who he is in public and what's going on inside of him privately.

Like outwardly, Nicodemus is confident, accomplished, and respected. But inwardly, honestly, he's cautious, conflicted, curious, he's insecure. He's uncertain, still searching for answers.

Inwardly, even with all his accomplishments, he still senses that something's missing. And he wonders if this new rabbi in town might be able to help him figure out what's missing.

And is that not relatable? We all know our public selves, right? Our reputations, our resumes, the versions of ourselves that, you know, everyone else encounters, our proficient, best-foot-forward LinkedIn selves, right?

[ 6 : 38 ] And yet at the same time, in one way or another, all of us, don't we all struggle with imposter syndrome? I know I do. Don't we all struggle with imposter syndrome? We may know how to show up, right?

We may know how to look like we have it all together, but privately, inwardly, we know our shortcomings, our weaknesses, our insecurities, the handful of things we don't want exposed in broad daylight.

We still have our doubts. We still have all these questions that we still haven't resolved, the sense that even if things look put together, something's not quite right on the inside. Like Nicodemus, we all live with this discrepancy.

The gap is real for all of us. And so we all look to close the gap, right? Fill the holes. Find someone or something to supply what's missing in our lives. And that's why Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night.

He's coming to manage the gap. He's still in process. He's still trying to figure things out. And yet, before Nicodemus can even finish his thought, Jesus cuts straight through all the diplomacy to the heart of the matter.

[ 7 : 42 ] When Nicodemus, when he respectfully calls Jesus rabbi, even acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher sent from God, and that he wouldn't be able to do these things unless he had God's presence with him, Jesus kind of awkwardly changes the conversation.

He doesn't thank Nicodemus for the kind words. He doesn't credit Nicodemus for being an early adopter. He doesn't appreciate Nicodemus for the validation. He doesn't use this moment to position and establish himself with an insider amongst the religious establishment.

No, Jesus looks right into Nicodemus' heart and seemingly doesn't even respond materially to anything Nicodemus has just said to him about who he thinks Jesus is.

Jesus doesn't say, you're so close, man. You've almost got it right. Let me just clarify a couple missing pieces for you. No, as Nicodemus comes to him with a sense that something is missing, Jesus confirms that.

Yeah, something is indeed missing. Even further, he basically says that the gap that Nicodemus feels between his public identity and what he privately senses is missing, Jesus says that that gap is far, far wider than Nicodemus could even imagine.

[ 8 : 50 ] In fact, it's a gaping chasm, a chasm that won't be filled by better theology or even a few Sunday school lessons with Jesus. It won't be filled by increased moral effort, new spiritual techniques, or a few minor spiritual adjustments in Nicodemus' life to shore up his shortcomings.

No, Jesus is saying here in verse 3, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Like, you think you and your open-minded Pharisee buddies, Nicodemus, are seeing pretty clearly, coming to me as, you know, perhaps prospective allies, acknowledging that God is on my side.

You think you may have found in me the supplemental thing that's missing in your life. But what you need to know is that unless you experience a radical transformation, as radical as being born again, as radical as starting all over again, Yes, even you, O great teacher of Israel, unless you are born again, and unless you become like a little baby child, you will not see rightly.

You cannot and will not see what you most desire, the thing you most need to see. You cannot and will not see the kingdom of God unless you are born again. It's like going for your annual physical.

Maybe you have, like, a minor question about some muscle soreness you have for your physician, and then as soon as you get there, the doctor's like, immediately, you have a deadly illness, and it's going to require that you change your entire life.

[ 10 : 21 ] That's what Jesus is saying here. You must be born again. Now, before we go any further, let's slow down and talk about this phrase, born again, right? I'm sure it's, you know, got a lot of loaded meaning for a lot of us, political, religious, negative meaning often.

As Tim Keller puts it, it's common nowadays to believe that born again people are different from most of us. More emotional or more broken like drug addicts or emotionally unstable people, and they need a dramatic turnaround to get them on the right path.

We imagine they have done something so bad or are so weak and needy that only a seismic change in their lives will help them. Or maybe it's for people who need authority and structure in their lives, so they join, you know, regimented, authoritarian, religious, or political movements, as if being born again is for a certain kind of person.

But the problem, Keller says, with this view is that the biblical story doesn't allow us to hold this kind of view of what it means to be born again. Nicodemus is a civic leader. He's a member of the Sanhedrin. He's prosperous. He's devout.

He's an upstanding Pharisee. You couldn't have anyone with more religious credentials than Nicodemus. He's not an emotional or broken type of person at all. And when Nicodemus calls Jesus a rabbi, he's even being open-minded and respectful.

[11:34] This is a guy who has it all together. He's an admirable person, disciplined, successful, moral. And again, he's quite open-minded. This is the kind of person we say, that's a pretty good guy.

So whatever born again means, it cannot mean stop being, whatever Jesus is saying when he says be born again, it cannot mean that he's saying stop being immoral and start being good.

He's not just saying stop being broken and start being put together. Nicodemus is already good. Nicodemus is already put together. So Jesus is not calling Nicodemus to be more religious, but he is telling him that religion is not enough.

See, when Jesus says born again, the phrase, it literally means born from above. In other words, Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, what you lack isn't information, it isn't effort, it isn't sincerity, it's new creation life that you were never going to discover or secure for yourself.

You don't need refinement, you need regeneration. You don't need renovation, you need resurrection. And this is not just a word to Nicodemus, it's a word to all of us.

[12:44] If we are to see and enter the kingdom of God, we've got to be born again. We've got to be born in a new way from above, born from something, born from someone supernaturally outside of us.

Every single one of us, we all need to be born again. To be a Christian, to be a citizen in the kingdom of God is to be born again. This isn't a specific subtype of Christian. No, it's a necessary prerequisite, new birth.

Radical transformation. And the most crucial thing about this, Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us, the most humbling and eye-opening thing about all of this is that, last time I checked, can we make ourselves born?

You cannot make yourself born. Think about that, babies don't give birth to themselves. Birth is something that happens to you. Which means Jesus is not giving Nicodemus a new task to accomplish.

He's telling him that only God can give what he lacks. This isn't about believing harder. It's about receiving a life that you don't have. This isn't about turning over a new chapter.

[13:48] It's about being given a whole new beginning. Nicodemus thought the gap in his life could be closed with insight. Jesus tells him the truth. Only God can close a gap this deep.

So what do you think? Is this bad news or good news? Or might it be both in a wonderfully perfect way? Now put yourself in Nicodemus' shoes and try to imagine how radical, disruptive, confusing, and even offensive this would have been to his ears.

This was the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, right? If anyone understood the kingdom of God and how to see it, how to enter it, it should be him. And yet, as humble and as open-minded and as receptive to Jesus as Nicodemus was, he didn't come to Jesus thinking he was dead.

He didn't come to Jesus thinking he was an outsider to the kingdom. He came thinking probably that at least he was close, right? He didn't come saying, Rabbi, my life is a disaster.

I need a new life. He says, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. Again, Nicodemus thought the gap in his life could be closed with insight from a teacher, that the gap could be filled with a conversation, a clarification, a few missing theological pieces, maybe a new angle on what the Scriptures said and taught.

[15:04] He assumed Jesus would add something to his already impressive life. But Jesus doesn't offer addition. He announces impossibility.

Christianity isn't additive. It's comprehensively transformational. Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God. And I want us to pay attention to that word can and cannot.

That word cannot matters. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the problem isn't effort, it's ability. Capability. And that's something to panic over, isn't it? Not just for Nicodemus, but for all of us, right?

All of us who've built, most of us built our lives on competence and hard work and effort. We're good at checking off our task lists, completing our KPIs, leveling up, fulfilling our duties and responsibilities.

But here Jesus is saying, that's not the way into my kingdom. And this is so foreign to Nicodemus because so much of his life has been built on effort and on what he has been able to do himself.

[16:05] So Nicodemus keeps responding with questions like, how can this be? How can someone be born when they are old? And these aren't foolish questions. They're honest. Notice Nicodemus' words.

How can or, you know, he says, no one can do these things if you, you wouldn't be able to do these things if you didn't come from God, right? He's all about the can and the cannot.

In verse 2 and verse 4 and verse 9, there's can and cannot. Notice what Nicodemus can and cannot believe is possible. You see, in this interaction with Jesus, what's happening is Nicodemus is reaching the edge of what he believes is possible.

See, he doesn't just have questions here. He kind of has this implicit ceiling, a ceiling he's placed on his belief about what's possible and what needs to change and about how deeply problematic his current life is.

And that's many of us. We think we've mostly arrived. We're many of us on spiritual cruise control. We want Jesus for minor home improvements. And it's outside the scope of our imaginations to consider that he might want to demolish the whole of our houses, but also give us mansions and castles instead.

[17:19] See, Jesus doesn't do minor improvements. He gives new birth. Following him isn't adding a supplement to a pretty good life. It's the Spirit of God disrupting us, humbling us, remaking us.

Terrifying? Yes. But that's also where real joy, real liberty begins. So Jesus is saying, I want to blow the top off your ceiling, Nicodemus. I want to free you.

Nicodemus thought he was being open-minded, and indeed he was. When he came to see Jesus as an early adopter among the Pharisees, he was very willing to believe and accept the possibility that Jesus was a teacher sent from God.

This he did believe was possible. But what he couldn't believe was that someone could be born when they were old. That someone like him, of all people, could and in fact needed to start over and have a brand new life.

That's where his belief fell short as inadequate. It wasn't good enough to recognize the goodness and the wisdom and the power of Jesus, or even that God was with him. To believe rightly about Jesus means believing rightly about ourselves and how far we fall short of the people God is wanting to transform us into being.

[18:29] What Nicodemus needs is not a better version of himself. He needs a different kind of life altogether, a life he cannot generate in and of himself. In other words, Jesus is telling Nicodemus, everything you've built your life on has reached its limit.

And unless God does something that you cannot do for yourself, you will never see what you most want to see. And if you think about it, that's not just humbling again. It's terrifying. Because it means the kingdom of God is not entered by diligence, but by dependence.

Not by striving, but by surrender. And that's exactly why Jesus' words are so hard to hear, not just for Nicodemus, but for us. Because what this born-again stuff is all about, it isn't about answering the question, am I a good person or not?

But am I alive to God or not? Has the Spirit of God entered me from above and made me a new creation or not? Now at this point, if you're feeling stuck, a little like boxed in, you're in good company because Nicodemus was stuck too.

Again, he's asking, how can this be? How can someone be born when they are old? In other words, if I can't do this myself, if I can't will this into existence, if being born again isn't something I can achieve, if what Jesus is saying is true, that I cannot see the kingdom, I cannot enter it, I cannot make myself new, then how does it happen at all?

[19:40] Well, this is exactly the point that Jesus wanted to bring Nicodemus and all of us to, to ask this question in order to hear his gracious answer. Now look with me at verse 5. Now if that doesn't sound like much of an answer to you, again, you're in good company.

What does Jesus even mean here, talking about being born of water and the Spirit? What's he talking about, about this wind blowing wherever it pleases? Well, to summarize it, most simply, what Jesus is trying to explain to Nicodemus is that the new birth that we all need is something we can't achieve, but it's only something that can be brought about by God.

And I know this is something I already said, but here in verse 5, Jesus explains how this works, how it works to be born again from above. And he says basically that it's a work of God's Spirit.

And if that sounds like super abstract and overly spiritual, well, it is unapologetically spiritual. It's about the Holy Spirit.

It totally is about the invisible work of the Holy Spirit of God in our lives. But while it is definitively spiritual, it doesn't have to be abstract.

[21:08] Let me try to show you what Jesus is trying to show in Nicodemus. Look at verse 5 again. Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Now, there are multiple interpretations of this, but what the best commentators, I think, point out, and what I think Jesus is doing here, specifically as he talks to this knowledgeable Bible expert, this scholar Nicodemus, is I think he's referring to ancient Old Testament prophecies that Nicodemus surely should have been able to make a connection to, specifically the prophecy from Ezekiel chapter 36.

Now, without going into much detail, this prophecy was spoken to Israel in exile, in Babylon, after hundreds of years of, like, turning away from God, breaking covenant again and again and again. God gave them over to the oppressors of the world powers that be.

And so to the people of Israel, it must have seen to them, like, man, we just keep screwing up. Sure, maybe we go through a season of repentance and revival, but it's always a short season, and eventually the cycle continues.

We just can't seem to get it together. We just can't seem to fulfill our covenant commitment to Yahweh, and it's so demoralizing. It's so discouraging. Will we ever be able to live rightly and secure God's presence and blessing among us?

This was the sentiment of Israel, even in Nicodemus and Jesus' day, as Roman officers occupied their streets and cities. In fact, this is why the Pharisees existed. Nicodemus was a product of this movement where their strategy was to make Israel great again by just trying harder and to try to get all of Israel to try harder, to be faithful to God, faithful to His covenant, in order for the nation to be returned to blessing once again.

[ 22 : 45 ] Just try harder. Be more righteous. Be more pure. This is what Nicodemus had committed his whole life to. But as you can imagine, he and all of Israel must have felt so, so far from ever arriving.

Right? And maybe that's how many of us feel this morning in our own relationships with God, like we want to live these faithful, righteous lives that we know God wants for us, but we just keep screwing up.

We keep falling short with our spouses. Our tempers flare. We keep returning to this or that, you know, that vice or that substance, that addiction. We can't shake our pride, our greed, our selfishness.

We can't overcome our insecurities and our anxieties. These idols still remain in our life, even when we try our hardest. Your best, most strategic, most diligent, disciplined efforts, they seem to always fall short, right?

Or maybe you just don't even have the motivation to fight for holiness and righteousness anymore. I get it. I've been there. I am there. But this is exactly what Jesus was speaking to when he told Nicodemus that he needed to be born of water and the Spirit.

[ 23 : 52 ] Because see, in Ezekiel chapter 36, in this prophecy, the promise that God gives is of a day when his people will fully and finally be cleansed once and for all, never to be dirty again.

And not just on the outside, but on the inside, by water and the Spirit. And not just a cleansing of the old, but he promises new hearts. The very Spirit of God dwelling within them, moving them to obedience.

So see, basically what Jesus is saying here is that, hey, your best efforts are not enough. You need a thorough cleansing. You need the very presence of God. You need the power of God within you to truly be clean, to truly be made new, to truly overcome the muck in your life.

What you need is not a new technique, but a new heart that only the Spirit of God can create in you. Think of a plant. But Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, and he's saying to all of us, you don't need better pruning.

You don't need more fertilizer. No, you need a whole new root. Because your heart, your roots, they're dead, and dead things cannot resurrect themselves. That's why Jesus says here in verse six, flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

[ 25 : 01 ] Like, you might be able to produce what you already are, he says, but you cannot produce what you are not. Human effort may produce human results, but only the Spirit of God can produce new creation life.

And this is a work that, like the wind, is completely out of our control. It's invisible, and yet undeniable when it happens. So Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, you might think you know the Scriptures, but you've completely missed what they're pointing to.

They point not to you and what you must do or the initiative that you must take in order to enter into the kingdom of God. No, they point to me and God's gracious, divine initiative to bring from outside of His kingdom people like you in.

But now let's name the question underneath all this, though. Why does Nicodemus, and why do people like Nicodemus, like us maybe, why do even successful, upstanding, sincere, friendly, humble, open-minded people all still need new birth for entrance into God's kingdom?

What is it that was keeping Nicodemus outside the kingdom? He seems like a pretty good guy. It couldn't be, you know, it couldn't be some gross immorality in his life.

[ 26:16 ] It couldn't be a lack of knowledge or accomplishments. It couldn't be, you know, his closed-mindedness or his antagonism toward Jesus and what Jesus had to say. No, in fact, many of us would be thrilled to be, you know, known like Nicodemus was known in his community.

But see, that's precisely the issue. The problem is that as open-minded as Nicodemus was, he still could not conceive of his need for a deeper, more comprehensive, all-encompassing, massively disruptive transformation.

With his pedigree, his education, his moral seriousness, his religious achievement, he is quite content with his first birth, with his natural birth. And he cannot see his need for another birth.

Sure, he wouldn't say, you know, I'm perfect. In fact, he sought Jesus out because he knew he was missing something. But again, he could not conceive of needing a whole new start. He could not conceive of having to start again as a baby, as a child.

You know, according to the Jewish tradition at Nicodemus' time, only the formerly, you know, uncircumcised Gentile converts were ever called children newly born. But that's what Jesus was asking of him.

[ 27:23 ] Also, you know, the prevailing view of the Jewish faith at that time was that, you know, apart from, you know, leaving the faith altogether or doing some kind of heinous sin, if you're Jewish, you are automatically going to be admitted into God's kingdom.

But here, Jesus is turning that upside down. Jesus is saying that Nicodemus' life, impressive as it is, is not automatically or on its own merits, alive. Alive to God.

See, it's not that he's broken in obvious ways, but that he's grown presumptuous about his standing before God and about his own righteousness and about his need for change and repentance. He's convinced that he's mostly done a good job being in control of his own destiny.

He's convinced that his car's been running fine and so he came to Jesus just expecting a simple tune-up only to realize, only to be told that his engine was dead. Because, you see, his deepest sin, it may not have been, like, outright lawlessness, but it was something far more subtle, far more dangerous.

Because often, when we get very good at external obedience, our hearts can quietly drift from God. When righteousness becomes our rhythm, our culture, and the air we breathe, we can slowly stop paying attention to why we're obeying or who we're depending on.

[ 28:39 ] We can become so confident that we're walking in the light that we never stop to ask whether we're actually alive and in relationship with God. And that confidence, unchecked it, it hardens into self-righteousness, not loud arrogance, but quiet assumption.

A settled sense that basically, we're fine. That our life just needs a little tune-up, but certainly not a resurrection. And when that happens, we stop examining ourselves, we stop opening ourselves up to disruption, we stop imagining that God might need to confront us rather than just affirm us all the time.

Because we're convinced that the path we're on is straight, even if it slowly is drifting away from God. And thus, of course, the prospect of being born again, starting all over, right, would not only strike us as surprising, but also threatening.

Because Jesus isn't offering to improve Nicodemus' life, he's calling for the death of life in Nicodemus, that Nicodemus trusts. The death of Nicodemus' like very lifestyle.

He's calling for a new one to be given. And that's gotta feel like a loss, right? Like surrender, like death. And honestly, it is. It is loss. It is surrender. It is death. Which raises the question, is it worth it?

[ 29 : 57 ] And can I trust that this new life will be better than my already good life? But now look where Jesus takes the conversation next. Right when Nicodemus is most confused, most boxed in, Jesus does something unexpected.

He doesn't give him a technique. He gives him a story. Verse 14, Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

Nicodemus would have known this story like instantly. Israel's in the wilderness. They complain. They rebel. Poisonous serpents come, start biting people, people start dying. And what does God do?

Say, too bad, try harder, be more pure. That's what you get. Does he hand them a checklist? Does he do anything where it depends on their merit?

No. He has Moses lift up a bronze serpent and anyone who simply looks at what God has provided, they're the ones who live. No works, no penance, just trustful looking, up to what God has provided.

[ 31 : 05 ] And Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, that is how new birth happens, not by your initiative, but by God's. And here's the shock, though. The very sign of their judgment, a serpent lifted up, that actually becomes the place they look to receive mercy.

That actually becomes their salvation. And when Jesus brings this up with Nicodemus, what he's saying is, don't you see, Nicodemus? That's me. Not lifted up on a throne, but lifted up on a cross, where the consequences of all your sins are finally dealt with and where the mercy of God is finally unveiled.

New birth is free to you, but it will cost me everything. And that's what leads straight into verse 16, this verse we know well, we sang it earlier, for God so loved the world, right, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3.16, you know, it isn't some sentimental passage. God's love is not, you know, God overlooking sin, it's God taking sin into himself, so that when you lift up your eyes and believe, you live.

John 3.16 is about the radical love of God, not the teddy bear love of God. And this is where Jesus lands the plane in verses 16 to 21, for God so loved the world.

[ 32 : 21 ] Notice Jesus doesn't say, for God so loved the impressive, the cleaned up, the naturally religious. He says the world, people like Nicodemus, people like you and me. And verse 17 says something we forget, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

This means that Jesus is not cutting straight through Nicodemus' niceties out of, you know, impatience. He's not trying to rough Nicodemus up as this like, you know, terrible self-righteous Pharisee.

No, Jesus is just trying to pinpoint the crisis that Nicodemus needs to reckon with. Concerning his inadequate faith. Jesus is naming Nicodemus' crisis.

He's naming the crisis of the crowds. Verse 19, light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. That's the real issue. It's not just that Nicodemus comes at night.

It's that we all come at night. We're all afraid of the light. We all come wanting Jesus, but we want him on our own terms. We want help, but not exposure. We want forgiveness, but not surrender.

[ 33 : 26 ] We want life without the death of self that keeps us in control. We want the benefits of the light, but we don't want the exposure and the disruption of the light. We don't want our need for a brand new life to be exposed.

And yet, verse 21 is this invitation. Whoever does what is true comes into the light. Not whoever has it all together, whoever is really good at performing for God.

No. It's whoever stops hiding, whoever stops managing, whoever brings their whole self, brings their sin, brings their need, their weakness, their pride into the light of Christ. And the stunning promise is this.

When you come into the light, you're not going to meet a prosecutor. You're going to meet a savior. And look what that produces. Look how that changes a person. Later in John's gospel, after Jesus is lifted up and all the disciples flee, who comes for the body of Jesus?

Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes out of the darkness into the light to be near his crucified Messiah, asking for the body, washing it, handling what powerful men of the Sanhedrin would never be caught dead handling, doing the shameful work that was reserved for women and slaves.

[ 34 : 41 ] He comes to this unclean body. He throws down 75 pounds worth of aloe and myrrh, just an exorbitant amount. Nicodemus has transitioned from hiding in the night to honoring Jesus in the light.

He gives it all to identify with the dead body of his savior. Something has clearly happened, and it's not self-improvement. See, this is new birth. His identity is uprooted, replanted, and he became both humbler and braver at the very same time because of this new birth, because he no longer needed to protect his old self.

I love this C.S. Lewis quote. C.S. Lewis writes, give up yourself and you will find your real self. Keep back nothing, nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.

Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay, but look for Christ and you will find him and with him everything else thrown in.

Look for Christ and you will find him. Look for Christ and you will find him. Look up as they looked up to the serpent. So here's the question Jesus leaves us with.

[ 36 : 01 ] Will we stay in the dark to manage our appearances or will we come into the light? Even when it means massive disruption, will we come into the light not to be condemned but to be loved, perhaps even disruptively loved and lavished by God's devastating grace, cleansed and forgiven, adopted as newborn children, fully dependent, fully reliant, and yet also fully alive and forever secure in our Father's house?

Because see, Jesus is an offering to make us slightly better. No. Behold, I am making all things new. So let's look to him, to the lifted son who was lifted up in humiliation on the cross and exaltation into the clouds.

Let's look and let's live fully, finally, forever and for real. Let's pray. Lord, forgive us for the ways that we treat Jesus and his gospel as good news as just a supplement.

Forgive us for preferring supplements to resurrection, the resurrection that you want to give us. Give us a hunger for newness of life in the Spirit, oh God, a willingness to be disrupted by our Savior and a delight in the ways that he disrupts our lives to give us things far better than what we have been pursuing ourselves.

God, make us new. Fill us with your Spirit to that end, Lord God. In Jesus' name, amen.  
Amen.